

Strange Visitor from the Congo

by Wendymr

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Summary: An alternate beginnings story: what if Clark had been working at the Planet longer than Lois?

Strange Visitor from the Congo

This story takes the basic premise of 'Tempus, Anyone?' - that there is a parallel Metropolis - and tweaks it about a little, in order to address two questions which interested me. First, how would Lois have treated Clark if she had not met him until he was a much more experienced reporter, and far more self-assured - say, if he had been at a newspaper like the Planet for almost as long as she had? Second, the Lois we meet in the Pilot is sceptical, mistrustful and, in Clark's words, believes that 'everyone has an angle, there are no honest people left.' So why would she not have been suspicious and questioning about Superman; trying to establish 'the whole story'?

This story is not set in either *our* Metropolis, or the Metropolis of 'Tempus, Anyone?' - who says there is only one 'Alternate' universe? Therefore I have taken some liberties with events and characters; for instance, like Jeff Brogden, I find it hard to believe that Jonathan Kent would not have kept the globe (incidentally, Jeff, I assure you that I wrote that part of this story before I read your TUFFS episodes!). Things are not precisely as they were in either dimension.

Particular thanks to Yvonne Connell, who read an unfinished version of the story at a time when I was having difficulty with it; her encouragement, reassurance, helpful comments and suggestions are much appreciated, and I *definitely* could not have finished this without her input.

Wendy Richards w.m.richards@hrm.keele.ac.uk.

- Strange Visitor from the Congo -

~ Location: An Alternate Alternate Metropolis ~

Adjusting his tie, Clark Kent slid back into his chair, hoping that his co-workers at the Daily Planet would assume that his brief absence (to prevent a runaway bus crashing into a neighbouring building) had simply involved a visit to the men's room. He smiled softly to himself as he turned his attention back to the story on his computer screen; someone else could write up this latest Superman feat.

Clark's attention wandered from the words on his screen, an article on the mayor's chances of re-election in a year when public confidence in the city's administration had apparently sunk to an all-time low. Instead, he reflected on the dramatic way in which his life had changed in the past eighteen months. He still found it impossible to believe that in that short space of time he had found a way to use his powers to help people without jeopardising his personal privacy, had seen his creation, Superman, become Metropolis's most popular citizen, and he had broken up with Lana. That had been hard, in the beginning, Clark mused; after all, he and Lana had known each other since they were small children, and regardless of how their relationship had deteriorated, it had been difficult to accept that such a long friendship was over.

But Clark didn't regret a single thing about the decisions he'd made a year and a half ago. The day he'd met that funny little man, dressed in English Victorian clothes and wearing a bowler hat, was etched as clearly on Clark's mind as if it had happened yesterday. The man had not identified himself, yet appeared to know who Clark was. Not just his identity as Clark Kent, but as the only surviving citizen of Krypton.

Clark had known of his origins for most of his life. His adoptive parents, Jonathan and Martha Kent, had explained to him when he was very young about finding him in some kind of spaceship. Jonathan had later buried that spaceship - Clark had tried many times, but had been unable to locate it - but they had kept the small globe which had been with it. Clark well remembered the day, nearly six years ago, when the globe had 'spoken' to him for the first time, and his excitement, tinged with sadness, upon learning more about his true origins. His enthusiasm had been dampened, however, by Lana's reaction. She had always been anxious that Clark should never appear to be anything other than what she termed as 'normal'. Not only had she not wanted to know anything about Jor-El's words to Clark, but she had actually wanted him to destroy the globe.

< I should have realised then that our relationship had no future >
Clark reflected.

The coming of that strange man to Clark's apartment that day eighteen months ago had changed his life irrevocably, however. Clark had at that time been almost at his wits' end. As he saw it, he had a vast number of special abilities, which he wanted to use in order to help people. Yet there seemed to be no way of doing this without giving himself away; a number of times when he had managed to 'help' he had come close to being discovered. The consequences of its becoming public knowledge that Clark Kent was really an alien from outer space was not something Clark had really wanted to face. And there was Lana, continually urging him not to use his powers, to be 'normal'. And as Lana had been the only person who knew about him, what he really was, he had listened to her; she had been the one constant in

his life, and even if occasionally he had wondered if her behaviour wasn't... well, a little too *controlling,* he had ignored it, because he had needed someone who understood him. He had simply tried to ignore the nagging voice inside which kept telling him that Lana hadn't the first clue about what he really wanted, nor did she really care.

His visitor that evening had changed all that.

After informing Clark that he was aware of his true origins, the man had handed him a blue and red suit, and suggested that a secret identity might solve all his problems. (Except the problem of a fiancée who hated everything about Clark which was not 'normal', but that was a different matter altogether). Clark hadn't been sure what to think at first. The suit, made of Spandex and with a stylised 'S' on the front, had seemed so unlike anything he would normally wear that he simply could not imagine himself in it. The man had refused to explain how he had acquired the suit, and this had made Clark somewhat suspicious, especially as he recognised the 'S' design on the front as something which related to his Kryptonian heritage. When the Kents had found Clark as a baby in the spaceship, he had been wrapped in a blue blanket which had the same yellow design; and when the globe had 'spoken' to him, his birth parents, Jor-El and Lara, had both worn outfits with a similar-shaped 'S'.

But his visitor had persuaded him to try it on. After Clark's initial embarrassment - the suit was just so... *clinging* - he had realised that he did indeed look very different, especially without his glasses and with his hair slicked back. He began to believe that it could work.

Lana, of course, had been furious, and Clark had at last admitted to himself that their relationship was over. Lana had left Metropolis the day Clark had carried out his first rescue in the Suit, and they had not been in contact since. Clark had been saddened by this, but was realistic enough to recognise that it was for the best. He had been free to help people, as he had always wanted to do, and had tried discreetly to do in the past; now he could do so openly, without having his identity as Clark Kent open to scrutiny.

Since then, he had not looked for any romantic involvement, and in any case, what with combining his work at the Daily Planet with his Superman activities, he had little time for anything or anyone else in his life. Strangely enough, his life had not seemed as empty as he had feared it might be since breaking up with Lana; somehow, becoming the Man of Steel had helped him, as Clark, to be more self-confident and less hesitant in public and with friends. He seemed to have discovered a side of his personality which he had never known existed, and the shy, unsure Clark Kent of his adolescence and young adulthood was rarely seen these days. At twenty-nine, Clark now felt confident enough to accept himself exactly as he was and to be proud of his origins; even though, when dressed as Clark, he could never reveal those origins, the knowledge that when he was being Superman he was somehow representing Krypton gave him a secret sense of satisfaction. His colleagues at work had also noticed the difference in Clark and appeared to have a greater respect for him, seeking him out to ask his advice on anything from writing a story or approaching Perry White for a favour, to dealing with relationships. Ironical, thought Clark, when his own relationship had failed.

Superman... occasionally Clark still felt a little embarrassed at the name. He certainly wouldn't have chosen it for himself. But just before the little man had left... disappeared, Clark remembered with the same sense of bafflement he had felt at the time: one minute he had been watching, with his X-ray vision, as the man walked into an alley behind Clark's apartment, and the next he had vanished. Disappeared into thin air. Just before he had done so, however, Clark had distinctly heard him chuckle to himself and say, "Super! Another Super Man!" That had puzzled Clark, although he had thought no more of it until the story of his first rescue appeared in the Press. The Planet reporter had referred to him in her story as 'Superman'. Pretending mere idle curiosity, Clark had asked the reporter why she had given that name to the man in the red and blue suit. Alison had shrugged, looking a little unsure herself.

"It just seemed to fit. I don't know... there was someone in the crowd watching him rescue that little girl and as everyone was cheering, he - that man - shouted 'Well done, Superman!' I've no idea who he was... when I turned to look for him, to ask if he knew the guy, there was no sign of him."

Very strange, Clark had thought. He had wondered for a while if the man in the crowd had been the same man who had visited him with the suit, but as there seemed to be no way of finding out, Alison having barely seen him, Clark had just put it out of his mind.

Emerging from his reflections, Clark tried to re-focus on his article, but found himself unable to concentrate; for once, inspiration wasn't flowing. He glanced around the newsroom, and noticed that a number of his colleagues were trying *not* to look at the editor's office. Turning his head in that direction, Clark observed that the blinds were closed and the door was shut. That was odd. Perry White normally maintained an open-door policy, and rarely demanded privacy.

Surreptitiously, Clark lowered his glasses and focused on the office. He could see the Planet's editor-in-chief seated behind his desk, apparently deep in conversation. His visitor was a young woman Clark had never seen before. She was slim, attractive, with longish dark brown hair; about his own age, Clark thought. He looked away, adjusting his glasses. He didn't know Perry's visitor, and it was nothing to do with him.

Clark began to speed-read through his notes on the re-election story, hoping to find that vital fact or comment which would provide him with the missing 'angle' for his story. After a few moments, his journalistic instincts took over, and he began to type furiously, an appropriate line of analysis having become clearer to him.

"Uh, attention everyone!"

Perry White's voice burst in on Clark's concentration, and he swung around in his chair to see the editor standing outside the office with his arm around the young woman's shoulders. She was looking around the newsroom with an expression of curiosity, but also, Clark thought, a strange air of possession which he did not understand.

His colleagues were also staring, as Perry began to speak. "I've got some great news for y'all. Some of you might recognise this young..."

The editor's voice continued to rise above the babble in the newsroom, but Clark had already heard Ralph, who occupied a desk several feet from his own, mutter, "My God! It's Lois Lane! Where the *hell* did she spring from?!"

Lois Lane! Clark was very familiar with that name, and the reputation which went with it. Ever since he'd joined the Planet nearly three years ago, Lois Lane had been cited as the epitome of all that was best in investigative reporting. Clark had read her work, of course, and he could see for himself just how good she had been. She certainly had seemed to merit Perry White's accolade of 'the best damned investigative reporter I ever worked with.'

But Lois Lane had been missing, presumed dead, for four years. About a year before Clark had arrived at the Planet, she and a photographer had gone to the Congo to investigate a gun-running story. The Planet had lost contact with them after a few days, and about a week later the badly-decomposed body of the photographer had been discovered by local police. Lois herself had not been seen again. No-one knew where she was, or remembered seeing her after her first couple of days in the area. Perry had sent people out to search for her, to no avail. The local police had pointed out that with the heat and the wild animals, it was perfectly possible that a body might never be found. But Perry, Clark had been told by some of his colleagues, had never quite accepted that Lois Lane was dead. Not surprising, in a way; it was clear that Perry White had considered Lois Lane to be the daughter he never had.

And it looked like Perry had been right, Clark mused as he watched the events unfolding. Perry had made a short welcome-back speech, explaining that somehow, against all the odds, Lois was alive and that the full story would be told at a later date, preferably in the pages of the Planet. Lois would be returning to work immediately, and Perry hoped that those who had joined the newsroom in Lois's absence would soon get to know her.

Clark took all of this in, together with the stunned reactions of his colleagues, but he could barely take his eyes off the young woman standing next to Perry. She was even more beautiful than he had at first thought. She was of medium height, with dark brown eyes to match her glossy brown hair; her skin was softly tanned and her clothes were... just right, Clark thought. Businesslike without being too formal. A dark above-the-knee skirt, a pale blouse and a long navy jacket. Striking, he thought. Her facial expression certainly showed pleasure at being back, Clark mused as he noticed her making eye contact with a number of her former colleagues and smiling at them. But the pleasure didn't entirely reach her eyes, it seemed; Clark wondered why.

Although Clark wasn't looking for romance, he had not been short of opportunity; a number of women whom he had met, both at the Planet and elsewhere while carrying out his professional duties had made their interest in him clear. Clark had liked some of the women who had shown an interest in him, although he hadn't been tempted to become involved with any of them - even Mayson Drake, the very

attractive former Assistant DA, who had eventually married an out-of-town DEA agent, Daniel Scardino. Linda King, a reporter for a rival paper, had also actively pursued Clark for a time, although he had always been unsure whether her interest in him was purely personal, or based on a desire to use his 'friendship' with Superman in order to get a story. In any event, Clark had accepted that women seemed to find him attractive, and had learned, over time, how to deflect advances without making the woman concerned feel embarrassed or spurned. He was certainly far more confident now in his personal dealings with members of the opposite sex than he had been while engaged to Lana. However, he had not seriously considered the prospect of becoming romantically involved again.

Lack of time for a relationship, he knew, was an obvious difficulty, what with his Super activities; but in addition, his experience with Lana had made him wary of letting anyone get close enough to know about his powers and his Kryptonian origins. Thankfully, Lana's aversion to that side of Clark no doubt ensured that she would never reveal his secret to anyone; but could he trust anyone else with that knowledge? He had decided, not without a sense of sadness, that he would need to spend his life alone. It would be safer that way. There were times when he had longed to have someone with whom he could share his hopes and fears; the exultation of the times when he had rescued someone from great danger; the sadness and despondency when he had arrived too late to help. But he had resigned himself to solitude, and never having a special person in whom he could confide. And he sometimes felt very lonely as a result; although he had a number of friends and could have as active a social life as he wanted, he sometimes longed for that one special woman with whom he could share his secret and his life.

But as he watched Lois Lane across the newsroom, Clark Kent had the strangest sense that he was looking at the woman he was destined to spend his life with. < How can I know that?> he thought in amazement. < I don't even know her! I've never spoken to her - I don't know the first thing about her!>

< It makes no difference> a voice from somewhere within him responded. < She's the one - what more do you need to know?>

Lois yawned and stretched as she closed down another recent back issue of the Planet electronically retrieved on her computer. It was tiring, catching up on lost years, she reflected. Oh, it was certainly necessary, and she was learning a lot. But now, after six hours spent simply reading newspapers and watching videotapes of news programmes and documentaries, she wished that someone could invent a computer chip to reprogram the brain. The information she needed could simply be placed on the chip and fed into her brain.

She had been back in Metropolis less than a week and, apart from a few changes which were harder to get used to, in some ways it felt as if she had never been away. And yet she had been away. The four years of her absence would take a long time to be erased from her memory. Four wasted years. In that time she could have earned another couple of Kerth awards or even been nominated for a Pulitzer. She could have been indisputably the best reporter in Metropolis.

Instead of which, she had been lost in a tiny village in the middle of the Congo. Oh, she bore no grudge against the people of that village; they had had no idea who she was when she had been found unconscious in the nearby jungle. She had been brought back to the village and nursed back to health. However, at first she'd had no memory of who she was, or why she was there at all. Because she spoke English, and because of her skin colour, the villagers had of course known that she was foreign, and they had offered, once she had recovered, to take her to the capital city, several days' journey away. But for some reason she had been unwilling to go, had been afraid.

So she had remained in the village, earning her keep by teaching the children to read and write; in English at first, then, as she'd learned the local dialect, she had also taught them to write their own language. Occasionally the village elders had suggested to her that she ought to think about returning to 'her own people', but she had always responded that, as she did not know who 'her own people' were, what was the point?

Until the day some medical missionaries had arrived in the village - about two months ago now, Lois recalled. They had looked at her strangely, and had questioned her, in a mixture of local dialect and French, about her origins. She had been able to tell them little. However, they had returned some weeks later bearing a three-year-old copy of the Daily Planet. The front page bore the headline 'Planet journalist still missing', and carried a photograph of a younger woman with shorter hair than Lois had. The story concerned a woman who had been missing, possibly dead, in the Congo for a year.

It had been a long time since Lois had seen her reflection in anything other than a river or stream, so she did not instantly recognise the photograph of herself. But something about the description of the young woman struck a chord within her. It took a few hours, but she eventually remembered everything. How she and her colleague had been followed from the moment they'd set foot in the country. How they had been surrounded by the terrorists and mercenaries involved in the gun-running late one night, and Pete, her colleague, had created a diversion.

She remembered his scream, "Run, Lois!" then his cry of pain as the bullet had hit him. She had dared not run back. She had crashed through the undergrowth in fear for her life. The sounds behind her had made her aware that she was being followed, but she had carried on running. Voices calling. Footsteps. Shouts. Gunshots. Then the noises had seemed to be further away, but still she had kept going. Then she had met an immovable object, and lapsed into unconsciousness.

The doctors who had examined her since her return to civilisation had all suggested that her memory loss while in the village had been traumatic. After all, nearly getting killed was enough to traumatise anyone. Lois herself was aware that it wasn't just the fear for her life. Pete had been killed. She had simply run away. Lois felt that she was a coward. She had barely been able to face Pete's widow, who had come to see her shortly after she'd arrived back in Metropolis. The woman, Claire, had been so pleased that Lois was safe, so anxious to hear about her husband's last days, that Lois had felt like a hypocrite.

< How happy would you be to see me if you knew that Pete might be alive if it wasn't for me?> Lois had screamed silently.

Shaking her head now to clear her mind of the uncomfortable memories, Lois left the conference room to fetch a coffee from the machine. Walking across the newsroom, remodelled in her absence, she caught sight of the reporter from Kansas. < What was his name again?> she puzzled... < Kent. Clark Kent>. Another, more recent, memory...

"Lois, this is Clark Kent," Perry had introduced them.

Lois had noticed the tall, dark-haired man earlier, sitting towards the back of the room watching her closely. She now took his hand, noticing his firm grip. His smile was quite nice as well, she had thought, and his eyes... he looked like the kind of person someone could confide in. She heard his polite greeting to her, and some mischief, or an urge to demonstrate her superiority, had made her reply,

"You're from out of state, are you?"

He had smiled again, clearly paying tribute to her powers of observation. "From Smallville. That's in Kansas."

"Oh, right, Kansas," she had replied, dismissively.

But Kent had not turned out to be the 'hack from Nowheresville' that Lois had imagined him to be. Far from it; in fact, from the back-issues of the Planet that she had been reading, it was clear to Lois that Kent seemed to be the most able journalist on the Planet's staff. < Apart from me, that is> she reminded herself sharply. Clark Kent's work was sharp, intuitive and sensitive. He appeared to have gained the confidence of most of the important people in Metropolis, judging by his apparent ease of access to people in high places. His writing wasn't quite hard-edged enough for Lois, but then, that was one of her strongest points.

Kent appeared to work mostly alone, but occasionally co-wrote pieces with one or two other staff writers, mainly Ralph and Alison, Lois had noted. After returning to the conference room with her coffee, she found a couple of Kent's co-authored articles and re-read them. She noted, much to her amusement, that she could actually tell who had written which parts. And Kent's were far better written.

Perry had told Lois that until she had found her feet she would need to work with one of the other staffers in the newsroom. She hadn't particularly liked that idea, but had recognised that after four years away she was bound to need some breaking in again. She wondered whether Perry would go along with the idea if she suggested working with Kent. < At least with him I'm not likely to feel I'm doing all the work for someone else to take most of the credit, and he won't need me to speak in words of two syllables> she reasoned to herself.

Then she hesitated. It was strange... four years ago she would have been more likely to see someone like Clark Kent as a rival, rather than a potential collaborator and partner. Perhaps her years away had changed her more than she was willing to acknowledge.

Clark had unobtrusively watched Lois as she crossed the newsroom to get her coffee. This was her third day back at the Planet, and he had yet to speak to her properly. All the Planet employees were under strict instructions to leave Lois Lane alone; not to approach her; only to speak to her if she spoke first. It was understandable, he knew. She had only been back in the USA a few weeks, and much of that time had been spent in hospital. Perry had told the newsroom the story of Lois's four years' absence, and Clark was aware that it must have been extremely traumatic for her. He admired the young reporter's courage, in surviving her ordeal at all, and in returning to work in the profession which almost got her killed.

He felt, somehow, that he and Lois might well strike sparks off each other if they got a chance to get to know one another. When they had been introduced, she had made a smart comment about his being from out of state, and he had known full well that she had been subtly suggesting that he was a country hick. He had played into her hands by telling her he was from Smallville; true enough, except that he had omitted to mention that it was Smallville by way of South America, Australia, Paris, London and a number of other places. But then, Clark always preferred to let people make up their own minds about him, rather than shaping their expectations by giving them too much information. He supposed that perhaps he was rather too used to having to keep much of his life secret.

Sipping her coffee, Lois attempted to refocus on her task. The sooner she could prove to Perry that she had familiarised herself with events over the past four years, and with events and personalities in modern Metropolis, the sooner she would be back on the beat.

But it wasn't just external events Lois was finding she had to get used to. Everything had changed. Her old apartment had long ago been rented to someone else and her belongings stored in a Planet basement thanks to Perry, and so she was spending much of her spare time looking for somewhere to live; she couldn't stay with Perry and Alice indefinitely. At work, the rebuilding of the Planet after a fire meant that she barely recognised the interior any more. There were new colleagues to get used to, and old colleagues with changed responsibilities. The previous day, Lois had spotted Jimmy and asked him to organise her a phone and a computer in the conference room which had become her temporary workspace until a desk was made available for her; Jimmy had grinned at her, clearly enjoying the situation.

"Sorry, Lois, but I'm a bit higher up the food chain these days. I'll send Jack to take care of it."

Jack? Yet another new employee, and apparently a protegee of Clark's, from what Lois could ascertain. It wasn't entirely clear from what little she had managed to find out, but it seemed as if Jack had been a small-time thief before joining the Planet. She had resolved to be on her guard around that particular individual.

And then there was the fact that everyone, in the Daily Planet and, it appeared, Metropolis in general, was practically swooning over some exhibitionist in blue tights and a red cape. This... creature,

who went by the name of 'Superman' and claimed to be from outer space, seemed to think he was some sort of guardian angel. Lois had read as much as possible about this newcomer, both from the Planet and from sources available on the Internet. But she had been surprised at how little in fact appeared to be known about the man... the extra-terrestrial, whatever he was. The articles she had read varied between factual descriptions of his feats, occasionally including very brief interviews with the hero himself, and op-ed pieces commenting on how lucky Metropolis was to have him. Lois had noticed that a very large proportion of the Planet pieces were written by Clark Kent; this she identified as a black mark against the other reporter. Someone with his apparent intelligence and abilities should be more critical and questioning, Lois firmly believed.

None of the pieces had considered exactly who this man was, where he came from, why he was in Metropolis, what his agenda was and what he did when he wasn't flying around doing the job of the emergency services. Even the government appeared satisfied simply to accept him as he appeared to be.

< Why?> Lois puzzled. < Has he brainwashed everyone? What's going on?> She determined that as soon as she could, she would get to the bottom of this Superman mystery.

The following morning the Planet's reporting staff filed into the conference room for the daily news conference. This morning Lois was joining them; for the past two days she had not, as she had been viewing apartments. She realised that she was being eyed with curiosity by most of her colleagues, which made her self-conscious and angry.

She felt another set of eyes on her, and swung around prepared to give the owner a piece of her mind for staring. Instead, she met the amused face and sympathetic brown eyes of Clark Kent. He was holding a mug, and he mouthed the word 'coffee?' at her. She nodded. Clark approached her a moment later, handing her another mug. It was the way Lois liked it: with a little low-fat milk. He handed her a sachet of artificial sweetener. Lois raised an eyebrow at this.

Clark grinned, not pretending to misunderstand. "My desk's not that far from the coffee machine, and you've paid it a few visits while I've been in the office over the past couple of days. It wasn't that difficult to figure out how you liked your coffee."

< Sounds plausible> Lois thought, < but why would you bother?> Especially, she considered, since he didn't appear to spend an enormous amount of time in the office. Lois had noticed him making quick exits on several occasions over the past couple of days. She surveyed her new colleague assessingly. Certainly, her initial impression of him as a country bumpkin had altered dramatically, and considering the way he was dressed today she wondered how she had ever thought that. He wore a suit straight out of the pages of GQ, in charcoal, with a crisp white shirt - and *cufflinks?* - and his tie was pure silk, although its strange geometric pattern and bright colours were certainly a shock to the system this early in the morning. His hair was carefully brushed back from his face with a styling product, and his glasses had clearly been chosen with regard

for his overall appearance. And yet, Lois thought, Clark Kent did not seem like a man who was vain about his appearance. He took the trouble to look good, she surmised, because he believed that appearance, like politeness and punctuality, was an important part of doing a good job.

And it was not just with the assistance of artificial aids such as clothes and hairstyle that Clark Kent was physically attractive. Lois thought, watching him take his seat next to her at the large table, that he was one of the most good-looking men she had ever met. Despite the ease with which he wore his business suit, she had the impression of a taut, well-honed muscular body. His facial features would not have looked out of place on a catwalk, and there was just something about those brown eyes... Lois wondered what it would be like to have them gaze into her own in a moment of passion. < Stop it!> she warned herself. < You're here to work, not lust over the available talent!>

In an attempt to distract herself, she smiled at Clark and said, "So - Perry tells me you're covering the Mayor's re-election campaign?"

"Yeah, among other things," Clark replied, returning Lois's smile. < He has a *beautiful* smile> her hormones prompted her. Dismissing such thoughts from her mind, she answered him, "So, how's the campaign going? What do you think of her chances?"

Clark, to Lois's surprise, looked a little unsure. "It's difficult to say. I'm following the campaign and reporting on it every day, and Perry also wants me to do a longer op-ed piece for the beginning of the final week. But I'm having a couple of problems putting my finger on precisely what's going on. With all the problems in the city over the last year, Maxwell - the opposition candidate - ought to be a shoo-in, for sure. But it's not really looking like that on the ground, despite what the polls have been saying."

Lois was interested. This was precisely the kind of story she would have been right in the middle of, four years before. "Maybe I could take a look at your notes, talk with you about your impressions?" she volunteered hopefully.

"Sure!" Clark accepted, sounding as if he was genuinely keen on the idea. "I'd like that, Lois, as long as Perry doesn't have other plans for you."

< Tactful, Kent> Lois thought. < At least you didn't say, as long as I'm up to it, or am I sure I understand the issues after being away for so long>.

Perry called the meeting to order at that moment, and their discussion had to end.

Clark watched Lois Lane surreptitiously during the meeting. He had already formed the impression from her writing, some of which he had re-read over the last couple of days, that she was a highly intelligent and intuitive woman. He had wondered how the experience of four years living in a tiny village in an African jungle might have affected her abilities, but he recognised during the meeting that she was clearly as sharp as ever. She did not contribute as frequently as the other journalists, but when she did, it was with a

comment worth listening to.

< Clever as well as beautiful... what a combination> he mused to himself. Clark was aware that Perry White intended Lois to work with another journalist for a week or so, until he felt that she was ready to resume her previous level of responsibility. It occurred to Clark, and not for the first time, that he would very much like to work with Lois himself, and he considered requesting Perry to team them up. But then he hesitated: he was dealing with a very intelligent woman here. Working alone, it was usually a fairly simple matter for Clark to slip off when he needed to be Superman. Even when he had been assigned to work with Ralph or Alison, it had not been too difficult to come up with an excuse to disappear. But Lois Lane was no fool. All the same... the idea was very tempting.

Clark's attention was dragged back to the meeting as he heard the name of his *alter ego* mentioned - and by the subject of his musings, Lois. He focused on what she was saying, and got quite a shock.

Lois, for her part, had waited until the main business of the meeting had been conducted, and Perry had asked whether there were any other points people wanted to raise. Signalling then that she wanted to speak, Lois cleared her throat.

"I've spent the last couple of days reading, and listening, and catching up on the issues which the Planet has been covering in the last few years," Lois began, warming to her theme. "And I found myself wondering just where the Planet's sense of perspective and independence has gone."

Most of the assembled reporters and researchers looked at her blankly. Perry interrupted brusquely, "Now Lois, you know I got nothing but respect for your instincts as a reporter. But the Planet has always been and will always be independent, pursuing nothing but the highest standards of journalism. If you've got a particular complaint, let's hear it. If not, then let's all get to work."

"I do have a particular complaint, Perry," Lois insisted. "It's about the Planet's coverage of this... super-hero, Superman." Again, all eyes were on Lois, most of her colleagues recognising the note of criticism in her voice and wondering at it. It was suddenly looking as if this morning's conference might be rather more interesting than most.

"What I saw in our coverage so far is nothing less than sycophancy," Lois stated bluntly. "All right, the guy seems to have done a lot of good so far, but that's no excuse for letting him off the hook. *Why* is he doing what he's doing? Why is he interfering in areas which should be the business of the police and the emergency services? Where does he come from? And most of all, what sort of exhibitionist is he - that outfit, the primary colours, the cape... and calling himself *Super*man, of all things? He's been around for nearly two years - and the Planet has made no attempt to find out the answers to any of those questions."

"What are you saying, Lois? That you think Superman might be some sort of... of alien conspiracy?" Perry interjected.

Lois's expression was sardonic. "Oh, please! This isn't the X-Files!

I don't know what I think - but that's the whole point. Why has no-one at the Planet written a proper expose of this man? Why haven't we at least *questioned* what he's doing, and whether he should be doing it?"

"Well, hell, Lois," Perry replied slowly, attempting to give her words due consideration without letting his star reporter see how he really felt about what she had said, "I guess because we know that Superman is a decent, genuine person who does his best to... help, and to do good."

"To fight for Truth and Justice, you mean," Lois objected sarcastically, quoting from an early article by Clark Kent on the super-hero.

Clark recognised his own words, and flushed slightly; realising it, he hoped that anyone who had seen would simply assume that he was embarrassed that Lois had chosen to quote his article. He had thought that the exclusive 'interview' with himself which he had written for the Planet would help to answer the public's questions and allay any fear about just who this red-and-blue apparition was and what his intentions were. But, quoted out of context like this, his words sounded trite.

One or two other reporters entered the discussion at this point, ridiculing Lois's argument and urging Perry to take no notice. Clark glanced at Lois in the seat beside him. She was chewing her pen-top, and there was a determined expression on her face; but he thought he saw hurt in her eyes.

Clark held up his hand, indicating that he wanted to speak. "Chief, I think Lois has a point. There are... unanswered questions. And maybe there ought to be a debate about what Superman's doing. This is the 1990s - people should be able to cope with open, honest questioning of the things we believe in. And if there's going to be a debate, the Planet, the best newspaper in Metropolis, should lead it. I think Lois should write a piece for the op-ed page."

Taken by surprise, Lois caught her breath and stared at Clark. He was one of the last people she had expected to support her on this; after all, she had read his Superman articles and he had never raised any questions about the man's motivation, or the wisdom of an entire city relying on one mysterious man for its well-being and security.

The editor was speaking. "Well, now, Clark, if you think it's a good idea we could consider it. But Clark, you know Superman. I wouldn't want him to think the Planet was turning against him, you know."

Clark shook his head. "He wouldn't think that, Chief. Superman's well aware that debate is a healthy part of democracy. I'm sure he wouldn't let it worry him."

Lois was taken aback by this exchange. Clark *knew* the man? How? Then she reminded herself that Clark appeared to be one of the very few journalists ever to have interviewed Superman; no doubt the super-hero trusted him and regarded him as a useful contact in the media. But did this mean that Superman had been shaping his media image by using reporters like Clark?

< I wouldn't let myself be used like that!> she thought fiercely. < Although I *do* want to interview him. I just have to figure out how to get close enough to arrange it... if Kent is close to this Superman, I'm not sure I want to do it through him.>

Clark returned to his desk in a pensive mood. So Lois Lane was suspicious of Superman's motives? He mused on this unexpected turn of events; it occurred to him that perhaps this was only to be expected given the reputation Lois had previously enjoyed as an investigative reporter. From what he could gather, one of her specialities had been exposes; not of the salacious kind, but exposing hypocrisy and criminal dealings among people in positions of power.

< So Superman's next on the Lane hit-list, is he?> Clark thought, smiling to himself. That possibility did not particularly worry him; after all, he had nothing to hide. No slush-funds, no back-handers, no secret relationships with foreign or alien powers. The only thing he did need to protect was his identity - and he resolved to be especially careful around the tenacious Ms Lane. He thought, not without some regret, that perhaps he should forget his idea of asking Perry whether he and Lois could team up together temporarily; it looked like a somewhat dangerous proposition in the circumstances.

But all the same, the situation saddened him. It was cruelly ironic, he considered. His relationship with Lana hadn't worked out mainly because of her attitude towards his special powers. Now he had met someone else to whom he felt attracted - and she too was hostile, or at the very least distrustful, of what he could do.

< Will I ever have someone in my life I can really talk to, and be *me* with?> he wondered sadly, not for the first time.

He sighed heavily, and tried to banish the depressing thoughts from his mind so he could get down to work.

"So tell me about Kent, Perry."

"What do you want to know, Lois?" the Planet's editor replied. Lois had accompanied him straight into his office following the staff meeting, and Perry had known by the look on her face that this was a discussion he might not like.

"Everything. Who he is, where he came from, what he eats for breakfast... I've been looking at some of his stuff, Perry, and apart from the Superman stories his work is pretty good," Lois replied, flinging herself into a chair.

"Lois, sit down, make yourself comfortable," Perry responded with an ironic lifting of one eyebrow. Lois simply grinned. "So what's the problem? Worried about the competition?" Perry added.

Lois shook her head. "No, I'm not. Isn't that strange? Before I... went away, I probably would have been. Oh, don't worry, Perry, I still want to be the best, and I will be. I still intend to win that Pulitzer, and there's been too many Kerth awards I haven't been in

the running for." Her expression was determined, a look Perry knew of old. "But Kent... no, I don't see him as competition in that sense."

Unsure exactly where this was leading, Perry leaned back in his chair and began the story of Clark's appointment to the Planet.

"Well, he'd made an appointment to see me - one of his college professors is an old friend of mine, you know how it is, and that's why I'd agreed to see Kent. Anyway, I was busy, and he arrived with this eager but nervous expression and a collection of stories he'd written for different papers around the world -"

"Around the world?" Lois interrupted.

"Yeah - he's travelled a lot. He's worked in South America, Asia, Europe... all over. Boy, I sure remember one of the articles he showed me, from the Borneo Gazette: 'Mating Habits of the Knob-Tailed Gecko.' I mean, Lois, what kind of *news* paper would print a story like that?" Perry laughed aloud.

"I didn't realise," Lois mused aloud, her forehead creasing. "I thought he was just a farmboy, straight from Kansas - probably worked on the local paper."

"He did, Lois, but that was a long time ago," Perry explained.

"But if his work was as - weird - as that, why'd you hire him?" Lois asked, still puzzled.

"Oh, I didn't!" Perry laughed. "I told him that with that kind of resume he couldn't just walk in here and expect to get a job. He was disappointed, of course, but what was I supposed to do? Anyway, I thought he'd left. I was trying to get someone over to Forty-Third to cover the razing of an old theatre - Ralph said he didn't have time, and Chris didn't want to do it - he's like you, Lois, says he doesn't like mood pieces. I guess Clark must have heard me talking to them." Perry shook his head, as if, three years later, he still had difficulty believing the sequence of events.

"The next day, Kent came in again," the editor recommenced the story. "I nearly didn't see him - after all, I figured I'd said all I had to say the previous day. But he stuck a piece of paper under my nose and practically begged me to read it. He said he wasn't asking for a job again; if I liked what I read I could pay him for it as a freelance. Well, I read it, and - well, you've seen how it is, Lois. That boy can write. With those few hundred words, he painted a picture as vivid as anything hanging on the walls of the Metropolis Art Gallery."

Perry got to his feet and went to examine one of the many Elvis portraits on the wall. "Y'see, Lois, Kent there was a bit like Elvis when the Colonel discovered him. A bit rough around the edges, a lot to learn about the business - but lots of raw talent and potential. All Kent needed was the right training and opportunities. He's had that at the Planet, and he's done even better than I expected. You know he won a Kerth last year?"

Lois hadn't heard that bit of news... how had she missed it, she wondered in surprise.

"So, Lois, what's your interest in Kent?" Perry challenged.

Lois shrugged. "Chief, you said you wanted me to work with someone else for a week or so. Personally, I don't think it's necessary, but if you insist, then I'd rather it was Kent than anyone else. You know I can't stand Ralph, and if you put me with any of the juniors I'll probably be at screaming point within a couple of days. But I think Kent'd be good to work with. He tells me he's working on the election story - I'd like to be in on that."

"I wouldn't imagine you'd know much about Mayor Leeson, Lois," Perry replied slowly, a little puzzled. "She kind of came from nowhere to win the election last time out, three years ago."

"Yeah, I saw that from the coverage so far of this election," Lois explained. "It's not the candidates as such, Perry. You know I like doing political stories, especially if there's something to get my teeth into."

"I'm not sure there is on this one," Perry replied. "Although from what Clark's been saying, the campaigning's suggesting the polls might be a bit out."

"Yeah, he told me that too," Lois commented, getting to her feet. "I don't know, I just think there might be more to this one. I don't know why I think that - call it gut instinct. There's something in all the stuff I've read I can't quite put my finger on. And I'd like to have a go at finding out."

Perry shrugged. "If Clark doesn't object, it's fine by me."

"You're working with me?" Clark's voice was incredulous, although Lois knew that Perry had already explained the situation to him. "I don't need a partner - I work alone."

"Not on this one you don't," Lois retorted, glaring at her reluctant colleague. This was **not** turning out the way she'd envisaged. Kent should be **grateful** for her help, and jumping at the chance of working with her. This reluctance was not what she'd expected after his friendly behaviour that morning.

Clark sighed. Despite his earlier resolve to avoid too much close contact with Lois Lane, he didn't seem to be getting much choice. "Well, if I have to have a partner, just remember one thing. I'm in charge, I ask the questions," Clark stated firmly.

"Oh really?" Lois demanded. "And who died and made you Superman?"

Clark grinned despite his determination to remain distant. There was something about a patented Lois Lane glare... colleagues at the Planet had warned him that she had the capacity to make grown men quiver with a single glance. But, strangely, the only effect it had on Clark was to make him respect Lois even more... and find her even more attractive. < Hell, what am I doing? She's... I **want** to get to know her better. And I can take care of the Superman problem>.

Capitulating, he extended his hand to touch Lois's arm lightly. "Lois, I'm kidding," he assured her in a softer tone.

"What?!" she exclaimed abruptly.

"Really, Lois, I was just teasing," he said apologetically. "After this morning I was thinking of asking Perry myself whether you could work with me on the election story. I've read a lot of your work, and I'd really love to work with you. I also think we'd work well together."

"So you tried your best to make me go back to Perry and tell him I'd never work with you if you were my last chance at a Pulitzer?" Lois replied incredulously. What on earth was this man playing at?

"Sorry - blame my weird sense of humour," Clark apologised. < Why did I ever think I didn't want to work with her? Stupid!> he cursed himself. < If I want to impress her, that's *sure* the right way to go about it!>

Lois shook her head. "Forget it. When can we get started?"

Clark was about to suggest they adjourn to the conference room. But suddenly his super-hearing kicked in; an airline pilot was sending a distress signal. Agitatedly, he ran his hand through his hair. "Not right now, Lois, I... I have a source I need to meet - for another story," he explained, using an excuse he hoped Lois would accept. "Maybe later this afternoon? I should be gone less than an hour."

He started to hurry towards the newsroom exit, then hesitated. Returning to his desk, he handed Lois a bulging folder. "Here's my notes so far. Have a look; see what you think. I'll talk to you later." With that, he was gone so fast that Lois noticed pages rustling on a number of desks in his wake.

Shaking her head in bemusement at Kent's apparently scatty behaviour, she took his file to the conference room. His action in giving it to her had surprised her; she certainly wouldn't have handed over details of her investigations so easily, even to someone she was working with. Either he trusted her, or he was just very naïve, Lois considered.

Three hours, and several cups of coffee, later - and no sign of Kent, Lois thought with annoyance - she was still no closer to working out exactly what it was about the election which was nagging her. She had been through Kent's notes and all his published stories about the campaign five times over, and had also read the coverage in a number of competitor papers. As Perry had said to her earlier, Mayor Leeson was new on the political scene since Lois's disappearance, so it couldn't be that Lois knew something about the outgoing mayor... could it?

Unable to figure out just why she was so sure there was more to the story than met the eye, and irritated that Kent had not bothered to come back, Lois collected her coat to leave for the day. It was still a little early, but she had decided to pick up a couple of evening

papers to see if there was anywhere decent to rent. Her search for accommodation had not been particularly fruitful so far: the rental agents she had spoken to had made it clear that demand for the kind of apartment Lois wanted far exceeded supply at present, and they were certainly not putting sufficient effort into finding her a suitable place, as far as Lois was concerned.

Lois decided to walk, as it was a fine day, and a few blocks from the Planet she stopped by a street vendor to buy the papers she wanted. As she was paying for them, she suddenly felt her arm roughly knocked by a passer-by. Her purse fell, and as she bent to pick it up, she felt a sharp pain in the back of her head. She emitted a cry of distress as everything went black, and she fell to the ground.

Rescuing the plane in distress had taken longer than Clark had anticipated, since the pilot had actually suffered a heart attack and the co-pilot, who was relatively inexperienced, had simply panicked. Clark had been forced to land the plane himself, gripping the fuselage from underneath and guiding it down, and then had needed to rip open the main door since the co-pilot had been unable, for whatever reason, to release the main locking mechanism. He had then flown the pilot to hospital and left the airport ground staff to see to the passengers and crew.

Then, on his way back to the Planet, he had spotted a train derailment just on the outskirts of the city, and had felt obliged to stop and help. Now, as he was eventually making his way back to the office, he wondered how Lois would react to his prolonged absence. That was certainly a drawback to having a partner, he reflected, however temporary the arrangement might be.

Within sight of the Planet's globe, his attention was suddenly distracted by another cry. He focused; a woman had just been mugged, by the look of it. He sighed; another couple of minutes couldn't hurt. Clark swooped down and caught the mugger by the collar just as he was trying to run off with the woman's purse.

Holding on to the mugger with one hand, Clark turned to the victim of the attack, who was slumped on the ground. "Ma'am?" he called, trying to attract her attention. The woman moved slightly, then groaned. Clark stilled with shock as he realised the identity of the mugger's victim.

"Lois?" he muttered incredulously.

The mugger, feeling the Man of Steel's grip on his collar loosen, took advantage of the situation to make a run for it. Clark, noticing his erstwhile captive's escape, began to chase him, but hesitated, looking anxiously at Lois. Somewhere in his subconscious, he also became aware that plenty of passers-by had stopped to stare at *him*, but no-one was making any attempt at all to assist the obviously injured woman.

Superman crouched down beside Lois. "Are you all right? Let me get you to a hospital." He began to slide his arms under her still-prone body.

Lois, gradually regaining her senses, became aware of two things. First, she had an appalling headache. Second, someone... a man dressed in bright blue and red... was trying to lift her up. Ignoring the headache, she sat up of her own accord.

"I'm fine, Mr... Superman," she stated bluntly and with complete disregard for the truth.

"Just 'Superman' will do," Clark replied, trying his best to smother a smile. Fixing his normal 'super-hero' expression firmly on his face, he added, "You were knocked unconscious, from what I saw. You need to be seen by a doctor."

"I said I'm *fine*," Lois insisted again. She noticed that her rescuer was holding her purse, and she snatched it away from him. "Look, thank you for your help. But you can fly off now - I'm sure there are plenty of other people who'd welcome your help."

Because you don't, Clark thought to himself wryly. He was determined not to respond to Lois's blatant hints, however. Telling himself that it was because he was genuinely concerned about her, and not because he wanted to show her exactly what Superman was capable of, he speedily gathered her into his arms and lifted them both into the air.

"What are you... Put me down!" Lois demanded angrily. "I told you I don't want your help!"

Superman ignored her.

"I'll sue you for abduction!" Lois yelled.

He simply smiled at her. "Try serving me with the writ."

"Easy," Lois retorted. "I'll just stand on a window-ledge and yell 'Help, Superman!' From what I've read about you, that ought to get your attention."

"Not very original," Superman replied with an amused grin. "I'd expect better from you, Ms Lane."

Lois stared at him. How did this... exhibitionist vigilante know her name?

Seeing her surprise, Clark quickly covered for himself. "Your journalistic reputation precedes you, Ms Lane. I'd heard you were back in Metropolis. And... thanks to a friend of mine who tells me you might want to talk to me, I know that you're not exactly my biggest fan."

< Kent!> Lois mentally screamed. < Can't keep his big mouth shut, can he?> She glanced up at her captor, seeing only a bland expression and brown eyes intent on scanning the skies and the city landscape below. "Does it bother you, then, that someone might not fall at your feet in admiration?"

Her response was an amazed laugh, which to Lois's surprise sounded far too genuine to be faked. "No, of course, not! It really doesn't bother me what people think of me. I just do what I do regardless." He gestured towards the ground. "The hospital's just over there -

I'll take you to the accident and emergency department."

"No!" Lois protested angrily. "Look, I didn't ask for your help, and I told you I didn't want to go to hospital." She hit out at his chest, realising too late that his body was far too strong for her efforts to hurt him "I've had more than enough of hospitals lately," she muttered to herself.

Clark heard her, but decided not to comment. "If you're positive you don't want to go to hospital, then I can't really make you - although you know you could be suffering from concussion, so you should see a doctor. Where can I take you?"

"You don't need to take me anywhere!" Lois retorted. "Put me down - I can get a cab."

"No way," her captor replied. "Either I take you home, or I take you right into the accident and emergency department and hand you over to a doctor."

Lois glanced downwards; they were still a good fifty feet from the ground, so attempting to jump wouldn't get her very far. She wanted to get away from the Superhero; although it might appear as if she had the perfect opportunity to find out more about him, she wanted to interview him in a context where she felt at less of a disadvantage. Not held close to his chest, several yards off the ground, and with a splitting headache. On the other hand, the thought of being poked and prodded by yet more doctors was even less appealing.

Resigned, she turned her head to look at Superman, regretting it immediately as another stab of pain hit her in the temple. Clark noticed Lois's instinctive wince, but tactfully decided not to comment. Closing her eyes briefly, Lois muttered, "OK, OK, you win. You can take me to Perry White's house. It's - "

"I know where it is," Clark interrupted, and took off again, flying more slowly than he normally would in an attempt to avoid causing Lois further pain. The editor of the Daily Planet lived with his wife Alice in a suburban house a couple of miles from the centre of the city, and Clark knew the layout reasonably well from his visits to the house. He was aware that the rear of the house was actually not overlooked, and so he headed in that direction. As he approached, he noticed a partially open sash window in a downstairs room - the living room, he remembered - and he used his super-breath to nudge the window fully open.

He deposited Lois in the centre of the room, taking light hold of her shoulders once he had set her on her feet; he persuaded himself that he was concerned for her physical well-being. That cut still needed attention: blood was trickling down her face, and he was concerned that she might be concussed. Clark focused, and stared into her eyes; he had helped at enough medical emergencies to have learned some basic first aid. Her pupils looked healthy enough...

Lois pushed sharply at Superman's shoulders, to little avail as, she discovered, the man, or whatever he was, was as solid as Mount Rushmore. "Let go of me!" she protested. "You've brought me back here like you insisted, so you can go now."

"Just a minute, Ms Lane," Clark insisted. "I'm still concerned about

your injury."

"I told you I'd be fine," Lois insisted firmly. "I'm sure somewhere there's someone who'll be grateful for your help."

The Super-hero favoured her with an ironic lift of an eyebrow as he observed, "Strange as you may think it, I don't actually look for gratitude. I don't know where you got this odd idea that I'm some sort of narcissist, always seeking admiration."

Lois didn't bother replying. She was finding that Superman's presence affected her in some strange way she couldn't quite identify. Oh, he was good-looking, that was undeniable, and his... muscular structure, clearly visible through the tight spandex, was very impressive. If you like that sort of thing, she told herself dismissively. Her thought processes were interrupted by the touch of fingers on her forehead, brushing back her hair. She jerked her head upwards, and launched her arm in a karate motion towards Superman's forearm. He was too quick for her, however, and she found her wrist captured and held in a light but inescapable grip. With his free hand, Superman continued to touch her forehead.

Eyes flashing angrily, Lois glared at him and prepared to launch a stinging verbal attack. She was pre-empted by a soft but insistent command. "Relax. This might hurt a little, but I'll be as gentle as I can."

She stared at him, not understanding what he meant. What she saw gave her no clues. He was focusing his eyes on her forehead. As he did so, she felt a hot, stinging sensation in the region of the cut; she flinched as the pain registered, but he released her wrist and gripped her shoulder, holding her steady.

"Sorry. I knew that would hurt, but the bleeding had to be stopped," he said after a few moments, stepping back from her. "I X-rayed the site first - there were no foreign objects or dirt in there, so it should heal fine. I don't think you have any concussion either, though to be on the safe side you should take things easy and avoid alcohol for a day or so."

He had been *sealing* the cut... Lois was amazed. Just what else could this man from another planet do? She swallowed, and turned her head away from him. "I... er... I... guess I should thank you for doing that," she muttered, reluctance competing with guilt - Lois wasn't usually *this* belligerent when confronted with someone who had genuinely helped her. "And... for getting my purse back," she added, in a voice which even to her own ears sounded too much like a child ordered to apologise unwillingly.

She glanced back in time to see Superman smile - was he being smug because he had succeeded in gaining her gratitude, she wondered? So, despite his earlier claim, he did enjoy the thanks and adulation of his fans. Well, there was a good start for her article, she thought. Anger flared again, and raising her chin, she taunted, "So you got my thanks after all, Superman. Make you feel good, did it?"

He smiled again, and took a step towards her, his head tilted slightly to one side. "Not particularly, Ms Lane, especially as I got the impression you didn't exactly mean it. I think that perhaps you might want to express your gratitude in a different way...?"

Lois stared at him. "What do you mean?"

He stretched out his hand to grip her chin lightly, tilting her face up to his, and bent his own head. Before Lois had time to guess his intention, he had brushed his lips across hers and was taking a step backwards.

"How - how **dare** you!" she demanded furiously. "I did **not** invite you to... to assault me in that manner! That's sexual harassment... assault!"

"Au revoir, Ms Lane," Superman murmured with another infuriating smile as he leapt with ease onto the windowsill. "Until we meet again."

"Not if I can help it!" Lois said through gritted teeth as he drifted upwards.

"Lois? Lois, who are you talking to?" Alice White's voice warned Lois of her host's imminent arrival on the scene. Not wanting to have to explain what had just happened, she tried to compose herself, and quickly finger-brushed her fringe down to cover the cut on her forehead. She managed to enter into conversation with Alice in as normal a voice as she could manage, but inwardly she was seething. **How** could this - Superman - have behaved like that - and how could she have let him?

Annoyed with himself, Clark flew swiftly back to the Planet. It had been a very stupid thing to do - his behaviour during the whole encounter had been idiotic. When he had seen that Lois was injured, he should simply have asked someone to call an ambulance. < But no. You had to show off, try to impress her with your strength and your ability to fly> he mocked himself. < You thought you could win her over with a smile and a five-minute flight over the city.> Even when Lois had refused to be treated at the hospital, Clark told himself, he should simply have insisted - or let her call a cab. Damn it, if he was really so concerned he could have followed the taxi back to Perry White's house, and even told Perry, as Clark, that Superman had mentioned Lois's mugging.

< But you had to show off. And to Lois Lane, of all people... what if she had recognised you?>

< No-one has yet> he reminded himself. But a small voice pointed out that this was no guarantee that no-one would in the future. It also reminded him that only that morning he had identified in Lois Lane a woman of particular tenacity and brilliant investigative skills. Add to that her suspicion of Superman's motives, and she could be very dangerous to him.

< And so you had to kiss her! Very clever!>

Clark sighed. He had no idea why he had succumbed to that particular impulse; or perhaps he did, he acknowledged. Lois's taunting about his apparent desire for gratitude had annoyed him, and although he disliked acutely being seen as a sex object in the Superman persona and being lusted after by other women, contrarily Lois's complete

indifference to Superman had piqued him. Lois Lane was an extremely attractive woman, both in looks and in personality. She was also very prickly; they would strike sparks off each other, he was sure - maybe in more ways than one. The feelings he was already experiencing towards his new colleague made what he had once felt for Lana pale into insignificance.

But, as with his engagement to Lana, Clark realised that the greatest barrier to a meaningful relationship with Lois Lane would be his alter ego. Not for the same reasons; Lois didn't want Superman to hide, to pretend not to exist. She wanted to expose him. And it was highly unlikely that a discovery that Clark Kent was Superman's real identity would endear Clark to Lois in any way; yet he would have to reveal himself to her at some stage if they became involved in a serious way.

Clark sighed as it occurred to him that perhaps the odd little man who had provided him with his secret identity had not done him such a great favour after all. Twice now that Suit, and the Super-hero, had come between Clark and the possibility of a meaningful, lasting relationship with a special woman. But even as he mused upon this possibility, he dismissed the idea. It wasn't the Suit, or his Super persona, which had caused the difficulty in his relationship with Lana. It was the powers which he possessed; Lana simply wanted him to be **normal**, something which Clark had always known he was not, a state of affairs about which he had been deeply unhappy - until he had, with the mysterious stranger's help, found an outlet for these amazing powers of his. No, he could not regret becoming Superman. And while his assertion to Lois that he did not look for gratitude and adulation was quite correct, he did obtain a lot of pleasure and satisfaction from knowing that hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people were still alive today thanks to his intervention. The awards and public recognition meant little to Clark; what really counted was the expression of joy and relief on a mother's face when her child was returned safe after a dangerous or distressing experience, or the knowledge that he had been able to make a difference when, after an explosion or a collapse somewhere, he was able quickly to find people buried alive, and get them out safely, when the emergency services might have taken considerably longer and not have got there in time.

That was what Superman meant to Clark: to use his powers for the good of humanity, whether in large ways or small ways; **to make a difference**. That, he supposed, was what he should have said in that first 'interview' he had written up for the Planet: Lois's quoting of his 'truth and justice' comment that morning in the interview room had revealed just how naive he had really sounded.

Still, if Lois was determined to write her big article on Superman, she would probably want to interview him. He had no particular objection to the idea; he now knew that she was unlikely to penetrate his disguise (that was one positive outcome from this evening's debacle, he supposed), and he felt sufficiently confident in his own journalistic abilities not to be overly concerned about dealing with any particularly probing questions. And if he was able to make any positive impression on her at all, he might be able to set the record straight, to explain why he really did what he did.

In fact, he realised, he would enjoy the opportunity to set out what he believed his responsibilities as Superman to be. When he had first

adopted the role, although outwardly he had attempted to project an air of confidence and assertiveness - with that rather attention-grabbing suit, he felt he had needed to - he had in fact felt very uneasy about his public appearances, especially when there was any contact with the media. Time, and experience, had shown him that he was unlikely to be recognised as Clark Kent, and necessity had taught him how to handle even the most difficult of situations, be it a tricky rescue, some over-eager fans or a tenacious journalist intent on discovering 'the man beneath the Suit'. So Lois Lane shouldn't be too much of a challenge, he considered.

"I just wish I hadn't kissed her... that'll really improve her opinion of Superman!" Clark muttered angrily, startling a few passing swallows. He gritted his teeth, and set himself on a downward path towards the alley behind the Planet. Landing there less than a minute later, he ducked into a doorway, spun into his Clark clothes, and ran around the corner and into the Planet building.

The three figures in the darkened warehouse made an incongruous grouping. One was short, wiry and dressed in untidy denim. The second was Asian in appearance, though his clothing was Western and businesslike; the third, standing in shadows away from the other two, wore a very expensive-looking bespoke suit, over which was a Burberry overcoat, left unbuttoned. His face was in shadow, and he played no part in the discussion, but any observer - had there been one - could have seen that he followed the conversation closely.

The Asian spoke impatiently in an accented voice, "You assured us that the Lane woman was out of the way permanently. Now it appears that you lied... and we do not tolerate liars!"

His companion protested, in a nasal whine, "I thought she was dead! My men were firing at her and they saw her fall to the ground!"

The other man brushed this aside with a gesture. "That is not good enough! They did not check?"

"They were anxious to get out of the area in case anyone else was around!"

"They were careless!"

"All right, all right... but from what I've heard the Lane woman has no idea the ambush was anything other than bad luck. Surely it's not a problem - not now, four years later?!"

The Asian again made an impatient gesture. "You do not tell us what is and what is not important! You failed in your task - and we do not employ failures!"

"What? Oh, come on - she's back working at the Planet, it'll be no problem to booby-trap her car or something. Give me twenty-four hours - two days at the most, and I promise you she'll be no further danger to anyone." The wiry man appeared to realise that he himself was in danger in this situation, and his voice grew more high-pitched and urgent.

"Failures do not get a second chance."

The first man, realising his fate, turned and made a frantic, hopeless attempt to flee. He had only taken three running strides when his body jerked, contorted, and fell to the ground, dust flying upwards as he landed. His arms were outflung and his eyes, sightless, faced the roof as his assassin strolled to his side. Blood was pooling around the dead man's head as his killer carefully placed the small revolver, silencer still attached, by his side. Only then were the gloves the Asian had worn throughout visible in the ray of dull light from a street-lamp which penetrated through a small, very dirty window high up in the wall of the warehouse.

"Time to leave, Asabi," the previously silent witness commented, in a smooth cultured voice. An observer might have thought that he was simply suggesting a trip to the theatre.

Together, the pair exited the warehouse through a side door, and approached an anonymous-looking dark saloon car which was parked in the alley outside. As he climbed into the car, the third man's features became visible for the first time in the light from the car's interior. He appeared to be about forty, clean-shaven, with dark, well-cut curly hair, and an urbane expression.

As the car slid silently down the alley, the man called Asabi spoke again. "Shall I arrange for another professional to dispose of Ms Lane, sir?"

His companion, who was perusing a copy of the Planet's afternoon edition, shook his head in a leisurely, careless gesture. "No, nothing as crude as that. It seems so... untidy, somehow. On the other hand, if our intrepid reporter were to suffer an unfortunate accident, let's say the result of brake failure, or was the victim of a distressing and fatal mishap with some falling masonry, that would be... well, it would be tragic. Deeply regrettable, of course. Remind me to send flowers to the funeral, Asabi."

When Clark arrived at the Planet the following morning he found Lois already at her desk. She glanced around at his approach, and cut across his greeting with a faintly sarcastic, "Do you normally get in this late?"

Checking his watch, Clark protested mildly, "But it's only 8.15, Lois."

"And another thing. Just where did you get to yesterday? You rush off, telling me you'll only be an hour or so... We're supposed to be working together, Kent!"

Clark inhaled deeply, then replied, "I apologise, Lois. But if you've had a look at this morning's edition..." he reached for a copy of the paper, and opened it at the second page to reveal his account of the near-disaster at the airport; Clark had decided to leave the derailment story to a colleague as part of his aim not to be too closely associated with Superman.

Lois barely glanced at the page, observing dismissively, "Oh. Superman." She then sat upright in her chair, favouring Clark with a glare. "That reminds me, Kent, just where do you get off trying to

sabotage my plans for a Superman expose?"

"What?" Clark was incredulous.

"Don't try to deny it. I... ran into the blue-and-red personage himself yesterday evening, and he let slip that you had told him I wasn't one of his greatest fans. Now he's going to be on his guard and I'll have no chance of interviewing him. Great. Nice work, Kent!"

< Oh darn... get out of this one!> Clark thought quickly, then replied. "Lois, it's not what you think. You know I support your idea for a in-depth analysis of what Superman stands for. Remember, I backed you in front of Perry!"

Lois calmed fractionally. "Yeah, I... guess. So?"

"Well, I told Superman you wanted to interview him, and that it was going to be nothing like the kind of fluff pieces most journalists have tried to do, and he was interested. He... well, he suggested that he knows there are people who question his motives, and I think he'd be happy for the opportunity to answer some more searching questions." Clark avoided Lois's eyes as he spoke; he was used to talking about his *alter ego* in the third person, but he somehow felt less comfortable dissembling in front of Lois Lane.

Listening to Clark's explanation, Lois conceded that perhaps she had been a bit hasty in judging her temporary partner. It did appear as if he had been trying to help her; though she reassured herself that it was the kind of mistake *anyone* could have made - after all, how many people in this cut-throat world of journalism actually went out of their way to help other reporters, even if they worked for the same paper? Everyone was a competitor, after all.

"OK, well, I guess you were just trying to do me a favour," she said, in a softer tone. As she raised her eyes to Clark again, he returned his gaze to hers. For a moment, Lois felt as if they were the only two in the newsroom; the usually-raucous background chatter and noise faded to nothing, and an unusual tenseness appeared to grip the two of them. Lois's eyes fell to Clark's mouth, taking in its shape, and the whiteness of his teeth; unconsciously she wondered what his lips would feel like covering hers, how his strong hands would feel gripping her waist.

Clark was also transfixed, caught in the same feeling of suspended animation. He noticed Lois staring at his mouth, and began to lift his hand towards her chin, almost without conscious intent.

Whether they would in fact have kissed was not to be revealed; the mood was suddenly shattered by an office junior loudly shouting, "Donut, anyone?" Clark, suddenly recalled to reality, took a step backwards and gave his raised hand a puzzled stare, as if unable to recall exactly what he had been doing with it. Lois gasped faintly, and quickly closed her mouth, which had opened slightly in anticipation of what might have happened.

What *had* just happened? Lois looked away from Clark and tried to gather her thoughts. Had she really been on the point of being kissed by a man who was little more than a stranger - and welcoming the possibility? What was it about this Clark Kent, anyway? All right,

the man was quite attractive... **very** attractive, she admitted, but was she out of her mind? Lois had vowed never again to get involved with anyone from work after the incident with Claud, a colleague when she had first started working at the Planet.

Clark, equally stunned by the brief interlude, broke the silence between the pair. "Uh, Lois, I've got... uh, some things I need to do."

Gratefully, Lois seized the opportunity. "Yeah, Clark, that's good - I have some work I need to get on with too. Uh... why don't we get together on this mayoral story this afternoon?"

"Sure," Clark agreed, hurrying off to his own desk.

Lois was glad of his departure, not only because of her embarrassment at what had occurred, but also because there was some research she wanted to do for her Superman story, and given that Clark appeared to be such a good friend of the... man, alien, whatever he was, Lois didn't think that Clark was likely to approve.

Some time later, having searched the Planet archives for the sort of Superman rescue stories in which she was interested, Lois decided that it was time to talk to one of the reporters who had written some of the stories. Many of them had been written by Clark, but he was not an appropriate source for the line of enquiry Lois had in mind. She got to her feet and went to find Alison. Having explained to the younger woman that Lois wanted to discuss her perceptions of Superman, they collected cups of coffee and sat by Alison's desk.

"So, what do you want to know, Lois?"

"I'm just curious about what Superman's like when he rescues people," Lois explained, careful not to give too much away. "You've seen some rescues, and you've talked to people afterwards? Does he talk to them?"

"Yeah, sure! Well, from what they say, it seems he usually asks them if they're all right, or hurt anywhere, and then either puts them down somewhere safe or hands them over to paramedics. That's about it."

"Nothing more?" Lois asked cautiously. "What about his attitude towards... women? Young women?"

Alison looked puzzled. "Sorry, Lois, I'm not sure what you mean."

Lois grimaced slightly; she was going to have to be more explicit than she had intended. "Well, has he ever... I mean, has anyone ever said that he made... unwelcome advances?"

Alison stared at Lois, stunned. "Superman? You are joking, Lois! I mean... the guy's whiter than white!"

"So - no-one?" Lois asked, disappointed.

"My God - you **are** serious! Lois, really, the guy seems to act as if he's some sort of monk - no-one's ever seen him with a girlfriend or

anything, and you can be sure he's had plenty of invitations!" Alison paused for breath, then continued, "And I can tell you that there's not a single woman in Metropolis, of whatever age, would turn him down if he ever did show the slightest interest in... making advances, as you put it. Why do you ask, anyway?"

"Oh... just wondering," Lois said vaguely, trying now to minimise the significance of her enquiry, since it appeared that her theory was completely wrong.

Alison considered the older woman thoughtfully, then said slowly, "Your idea for some sort of expose of Superman - you were going to suggest that he uses his position to take advantage of people, weren't you? Portray him as some sort of sexual predator?"

Getting rapidly to her feet, Lois stammered quickly, "N-no, nothing like that, of course I wouldn't, it's a crazy idea, why would you think I'd want to do that, I... I was just exploring some thoughts... I've got to get back to work."

Returning quickly to her own desk, Lois sat unmoving for several minutes, trying to make sense of what she had just learnt. < If he really is like Alison said with everyone else, then why on earth did he kiss me?>

Clark Kent was puzzling over the same question while ostensibly putting the finishing touches to an item on spending and taxation priorities for the city's new administration, whoever ended up running it. What had possessed him to kiss Lois Lane in his guise as Superman... and why had he almost repeated the gesture earlier in the newsroom? The questions Superman's behaviour had caused Lois to ask were now common knowledge in the newsroom, although apart from Lois Clark was the only person who knew what had prompted her belief that Superman was some sort of sex fiend.

< Stupid - stupid - stupid!> Clark cursed himself, while resolving to behave with acute propriety the next time - if there was a next time - he encountered Lois as Superman. He also decided to keep out of her way as himself as much as possible, barring their work together on the election story. However, at the morning news conference, which this morning took place later than usual due to Perry's having had a breakfast meeting with the paper's owner, Clark noticed that Lois was the recipient of some strange glances and several sniggers. His colleagues were making fun of her, he realised with some shock. One even asked her, as the journalists filed out of the conference room afterwards, whether she was sure that she shouldn't have taken more time to recuperate before coming back to work, that perhaps the stress was too much for her. Lois's reply was sharp and to the point, but Clark saw the flush which rose high on her cheekbones, and realised that she was upset at having become a laughing-stock among her colleagues.

He sighed; he couldn't stand by and watch that continue. Quite apart from his instinctive dislike of seeing people get hurt, Lois Lane was also a brilliant journalist and did not deserve this kind of ridicule. He crossed to her desk, and asked, in a voice loud enough to be heard by a number of their colleagues, whether she had time to have lunch with him. "I could really do with your input on a couple

of things, if you have the time, Lois. I'd really appreciate having the benefit of your insight."

Surprised, Lois stared up at Clark Kent, wondering what he was up to. Was he trying to make a move on her, after the near-kiss that morning? But his expression held nothing personal, no hint of anything other than the persuasion of a work colleague. She hesitated, then decided that anything was better than remaining at her desk to be the cynosure of all eyes. "Sure, Clark, I'd be happy to."

In the nearby coffee shop, Clark watched Lois order a chocolate milkshake and double chocolate chip ice-cream - classic comfort food, he mused. After he had ordered his own sandwich, he caught her eye. "Lois, is something bothering you?"

She hesitated, then confessed. "I... made a real fool of myself this morning, Clark. I had a hunch, an... idea... and it didn't pan out. But now I just look stupid."

Clark smiled sympathetically. "Hey, it happens to us all, Lois. Look at me - a month ago I wrote a front-page article about this election saying the challenger, Marshall, should win by a landslide. A couple of weeks later, the polls started to shift, public opinion changed - hey, even some of the guys in the newsroom started talking about how Leeson should stay on as Mayor. Now it's beginning to look as if Leeson might romp home again... how, I don't know, but I'll look stupid in front of the entire city!"

Grateful that Clark hadn't tried to pretend he didn't know what Lois was referring to, she took his lead. "I've looked through your notes and all the other sources I can get my hands on, and I think you're right, there is something odd going on here. I can't work out what it is, though - but all the indications suggest that Leeson should be out on her ear, and yet Maxwell seems to be the one who's in trouble. I just wish I could figure out exactly what it is that's... bugging me about this." She watched Clark carefully, hoping that he wouldn't think she was crazy for suggesting that she might have any idea about what was going on.

"Yeah, me too," Clark replied with a wry grimace. "Look, Leeson is holding a press conference this afternoon - I'm going over there right after this. Want to come?"

Pleased, Lois began to accept, then remembered why she couldn't. "Oh, Clark, I really would have liked that, but I have an appointment to view an apartment in an hour. It's the first place I've heard about that sounds even half-suitable, and if I miss that appointment the apartment will be gone."

Clark gave an understanding smile. "Yeah, I remember what it was like when I first came to Metropolis - it was hard enough then finding anything at all, let alone anything I could afford. I ended up taking this filthy, run-down loft for what I thought was an exorbitant rent, because it was all I could find or afford."

"So where do you live now?" Lois asked.

"Same place - 344 Clinton."

"But I thought you said it was awful!" Lois replied, puzzled.

"It was - then. I cleaned it up a little, did some repairs, brought in a lot of furniture and stuff... I really like it now. And the neighbourhood's cleaned up a lot, I have some nice neighbours... I'm happy there." Clark smiled to himself as he remembered fixing up the apartment at Super-speed, and the role played by Superman of ridding the neighbourhood of certain undesirable elements such as drug-pushers.

"Sounds nice," Lois said wistfully. "I used to have a nice apartment too... but there's no chance of getting anything in that building now. Even if there was anything available, which there isn't, the rent's more than doubled since I lived there. It's all stock market traders and plastic surgeons now."

"You'll find something," Clark assured her cheerfully. "And when you do, if you want any help moving your stuff from storage, let me know."

"Thanks, I'd appreciate that," Lois replied, smiling gratefully at Clark. She hadn't expected that; sure, he seemed to be interested in her if his behaviour that morning was anything to go by, but she was sure that someone with his looks would have lots of women... friends. And she wasn't entirely sure that she wanted to be simply another notch on the belt of a good-looking, self-assured male. On the other hand, men who were only after a good time didn't normally offer their help in something as practical as moving apartments. Clark Kent seemed to be even more difficult to figure out than Lois had initially thought....

The apartment turned out to be spacious and quite well laid out; Lois thought she could be comfortable there. The rent was also within her budget, and it was located within walking distance from the Planet. This was an advantage as far as Lois was concerned; the legacy of four years living in the jungle meant that she was still wary of the heavy traffic on the streets of Metropolis, and she hadn't driven a car since her return. She wrote a cheque for her deposit and telephoned her bank to arrange for swift clearance, gave the landlord her references, and returned to the Planet. On her way back, she realised that her new apartment was quite close to Clark's place.

Clark, back at his desk, looked up as Lois crossed the newsroom. "How did you get on, Lois?"

"Fine - I took it," she replied, coming to stand by Clark's desk.

"Yeah? That's great! When do you move in?"

"Assuming the cheque clears, tomorrow." Lois grinned; although she was very fond of both Perry and Alice, she was really looking forward to having her own space again. Somewhere, apart from anything else, where she would not listen to Elvis records for two hours every evening, followed by videos of Elvis concerts...

"Well, I should be free tomorrow evening, if you'd like my help," Clark offered. "I'm pretty good at unpacking - and if there's any little jobs you need doing, anything needing fixing up, I'm not bad at that either."

"Hey, Kent, you're not one of those guys who thinks no woman can change a plug, are you?" Lois challenged.

"Not at all - I'm perfectly happy to watch you do that, if you like," Clark grinned. "Just offering my services... where is this place, anyway?"

Lois told him the address, then saw Clark do a double-take. "Hey, that's just a few blocks from my place! Well, I guess I won't have far to go if I ever need help... changing a plug." He raised an eyebrow at Lois, and she noticed the gleam in his brown eyes and the flash of his perfect white teeth as he grinned at her.

He's flirting. Ignore him, she instructed herself. Changing the subject, she enquired, "How was the press conference?"

Clark's expression altered, became serious. "Very strange. No-one was given any idea in advance why she was calling it. Turns out that Lex Luthor is donating twenty million dollars to the regeneration fund, specifically towards clearing the slums in Hobbs Bay and building decent low-cost housing."

"Luthor?" Lois exclaimed. "Wonder what's in it for him?"

Clark was taken by surprise by Lois's cynical response. "You know Luthor?"

"Yeah," Lois replied slowly. "Before I... left... even then he was one of the wealthiest men in America, and he was setting himself up as some sort of philanthropist. I never quite bought it, though... Before the gun-running story came up, I'd been trying to get the first exclusive Lex Luthor interview, but he never returned my calls."

"He's still just as media-shy, let me assure you," Clark replied in a tone laced with irony. "I've tried - and believe me, I can be persistent - but I never even got close. I don't trust him, either, but I thought I was the only one to feel that way. I'm convinced that underneath his public persona, he's a fraud."

"Oh, I could never prove anything..." Lois brushed away her suspicions. "But why is he helping Leeson, if she's - or she was - a no-hoper for re-election?"

Clark studied his pen for a few moments, then looked up at Lois. "It *could* just be coincidence... he needs to make the donation now for tax reasons..."

Lois shook her head. "Do you really buy that, Clark?"

"Nope. Why allow Leeson to turn it into a publicity stunt for her re-election?" Clark ran his hands busily through his hair. "Luthor's involvement in this is... something I didn't expect. But why?"

"Yeah... why would the - what is he now? Fourth richest man in the world?"

"Third," Clark supplied.

"OK, so why would the third richest man in the world bother with the re-election of a city mayor? All right, so Luthor lives in Metropolis..." Lois trailed off, looking at Clark for inspiration.

Clark had got to his feet, and he pulled a chair over, positioning it beside his desk. He gestured for Lois to sit before seating himself and responding. "Well, since he **does** live in Metropolis, a lot of his business interests are here. He has a construction company..."

"But the profits from a low-cost housing development in Hobbs Bay would be peanuts to him!" Lois objected.

"Yeah. But that might not be it at all," Clark added slowly. "Help the mayor get re-elected against all odds, and Luthor will have her gratitude... maybe there are things he wants to get past City Hall in the next couple of years..."

"Possibly," Lois agreed. "Well, we can check some of that out... who does research around here now?"

"Depends what you want," Clark replied. "The research department's pretty good - but if it's anything which requires less... **kosher**... methods, I use Jack."

Jack. The boy Clark had taken under his wing. Lois had met him a few days before when he had arranged her desk and equipment for him. She had thought he appeared capable but sulky; as if he resented being given orders. Her feelings must have been visible from her expression, for Clark commented that Jack was much more intelligent than he tended to let people guess, and that it took a while to earn his loyalty. "He's basically a good kid, Lois - it's not his fault he was abandoned by his parents and left to bring himself and his kid brother up in a condemned warehouse."

Lois felt guilty; she hadn't heard this version of Jack's background. "All right, Clark, why don't you get him to find out as much as he can about any plans any of Luthor's companies might have for the next few years? It might be a red herring, but it's a start."

Clark arrived at Perry's house early the following evening driving a van; Lois laughed in surprise when she brought her bags to the door.

"Where did you get that from - did you rent it?"

Clark grinned. "Jack borrowed it from a friend of his. I'm not asking any more questions - it's ours for the evening as long as I get it back by midnight."

"Jack?" Again, Lois wondered about the young Planet trainee. As she had suspected, he did appear to have some dubious connections.

But Clark, coming forward to carry Lois's bags to the van, shook his head. "Jack's OK, Lois. All right, if I hadn't vouched for him, he'd have been in juvenile detention, but he hasn't put a foot wrong since. He may have a few contacts I'd prefer not to know about, but on the other hand, most investigative reporters are on pretty good terms with a few criminals - we'd never get our stories if we weren't." He turned, having slammed the van's rear door. "Give the kid a chance, Lois."

"All right then." With a faintly impatient sigh - Lois felt that she remained to be convinced - she turned to thank Perry and Alice once more for their hospitality. Perry asked Clark yet again whether he needed any help with moving Lois's belongings, but Clark assured the older man that they could manage, adding that Jimmy and Jack were meeting Lois and himself at the Planet to pack Lois's furniture and other possessions into the van. Again Lois was surprised: she had no idea that Jimmy had offered to help, and as for Jack - why should this kid, who barely knew Lois but must be aware that she was not very well disposed towards him, be interested in helping her?

Clark, taking his attention from the road for the split second it took to glance across at Lois, noted the surprise in her expression. "I asked Jack and Jimmy whether they were busy tonight - they both offered to help as soon as they knew why I'd asked, and Jack offered to get the van, " he volunteered smoothly. < See? Jack deserves better than you believe of him> was the unspoken message, Lois thought.

At the Planet, furniture, packing cases and other items were carefully loaded into the van. Clark, of course, could have carried out the operation much more quickly and expertly alone, but he was aware that he would have found great difficulty in explaining this feat to Lois. So he pretended to have no more than the strength and stamina of a slightly above-average fit and healthy male, sharing with Jack the task of carrying Lois's stylish sofas. For Lois, the operation was somewhat disturbing. This was the first time she had seen her possessions in four years; it was, she felt, a bizarre and vaguely unsettling experience. While she had been staying at Perry's house, she had refused to look at any of her belongings, telling herself that there was no point until she had found a new apartment; her sister Lucy, who had come to Metropolis when Lois had first returned, had gone to the storage basement and collected a suitcase full of clothes for her older sister.

At the new apartment, Lois gave instructions for the positioning of the furniture, and remained to begin opening some of the packing cases while the men returned to the Planet for more items; there wasn't room in the van for four passengers, and Jimmy had taken Jack to the apartment on his motorbike. Without Lois, the three men had managed to fit in the cab.

The first couple of cases contained kitchen equipment, bed-linen, towels and other mundane household items; the third case took Lois completely by surprise. It contained her private notes on the gun-running investigation.

She sat down heavily on the sofa as she was suddenly transported back four years in time. She had been so confident about this investigation, sure that she had been going to *nail* one of Metropolis's most respected businessmen in connection with gangland activities and illegal weapons importing. Her hand moved to lift the cover on the first file, then stilled. No... she couldn't face looking at this material yet. What had started out as an investigation which she had been sure was going to win another Kerth - possibly an even bigger prize - had ended in tragedy. Lois closed her eyes briefly as she realised just how foolhardy she had been. *Too* confident, sure of success; convinced that the object of her investigation had no idea that she was pursuing him. But of course he had known. Lois, once she had recovered her memory, had realised that the ambush had been no accident. Among the voices which had come out of the darkness the night Pete had been shot and she had run for her life had been American accents, and yet, as far as Lois had been able to find out, the men running the operation on the ground in the Congo were locals. The men who had found Lois and her colleague that night had been sent to kill them.

Vaguely, Lois was aware that this was an aspect of the affair that she had yet to tell the police; why she had failed to do so, she was not sure. It couldn't be simple reluctance to spend time in police interviews; she had done plenty of that over the past couple of months. Was she afraid? Wondering whether, on her return to civilisation so many years later, her life was still at risk? Her fists clenched; she had never been a coward in the past, and she had no intention of starting now. Flinging the file aside, she forced herself to get to her feet and continue the laborious task of unpacking, ignoring the hot tears which involuntarily pooled in her eyes.

Just in time, she thought, as footsteps became audible out in the hall; the door opened and Clark came in carrying a coffee-table, followed by Jack and Jimmy with her chest of drawers.

Clark, in the act of setting down the table, glanced across at Lois. Her greeting on this occasion had been, he thought, over-bright, a little forced. He waited until the younger men had left the apartment again, then strolled over to close over the front door. Facing Lois, he said softly, "Is all this turning out to be a bit much for you? We can leave the rest for now, if you like."

"Oh!" Lois was taken aback; she thought she had managed to hide her change of mood quite successfully. Clark must be even more observant than she had given him credit for, she mused. He had offered her an excuse, she thought: an opportunity simply to claim that it was seeing all her belongings again which had upset her.

But somehow, she found that she couldn't bring herself to dissemble with this big, strong, gentle man. She shook her head slightly, then glanced down at the file on the floor. Clark crossed to pick it up; he took in its significance immediately. Returning it to the case containing Lois's other personal paperwork, he observed quietly, "I can't imagine what it must have been like for you. It's just amazing that you've managed to survive with your sanity intact."

Grateful that he had understood so easily, she commented, in a voice close to breaking, "I didn't feel particularly like I'd survived intact a couple of minutes ago."

On the point of taking Lois into his arms for what he hoped would not be an unwelcome comforting hug, Clark's super-hearing alerted him to footsteps and voices entering the hall. He raised an eyebrow at Lois enquiringly. "How about I get rid of the other two?"

The offer was tempting, but Lois felt that she couldn't accept. "They've been really helpful - I was going to order pizza..."

"Leave it to me," Clark replied smoothly. "Unless - as an independent career woman, you resent a mere male taking control?"

Unable to resist the humour in his voice, Lois smiled. "Usually, yes - but I think you're right. Thank you." As the apartment door swung open again, she moved swiftly into the bedroom, suddenly feeling unwilling to face the lively chatter of the two younger Planet employees. She heard the murmur of voices, then silence; then a tap on her bedroom door.

Clark's head appeared around the door-frame in response to her reply. "That was the last van-load anyway - I'll just get the rest of the stuff, then get out of your way if you'd like."

Lois scrambled off the bed, where she had been sitting cross-legged, as she realised that Clark was now on his own with whatever heavy items needed lifting. "Oh - do you need help?"

"Nope - I'm much better on my own than trying to co-ordinate movements with someone else," Clark replied smoothly, hoping that this excuse was sufficient. He intended to finish the job quickly using his super-powers - provided that Lois stayed in her bedroom. He was taken aback when Lois suddenly giggled.

"What did I say?" he demanded.

Lois dipped her head, allowing her dark hair to obscure her face. "Well, if you need an explanation... let's just say I hope you never say that to your wife!"

"I'm not married!" Clark replied, surprised. He suddenly realised the alternative construction which Lois had put on his words, and decided upon a strategic retreat.

A few trips and several minutes later, during which Lois had stayed in her bedroom unpacking clothes, Clark came in on his already-advertised last trip from the van to her apartment. This time, Lois was in the kitchen, opening a bottle of wine.

"That's it - all done," Clark commented, preparing to take his leave. But Lois stopped him, holding aloft the bottle and two wine-glasses which she must have unearthed from one of the boxes, he assumed. He hesitated. "I thought you'd prefer to be on your own," he offered after a few moments.

"No," Lois confessed in a small voice. "I didn't really want to face Jimmy - or Jack. But... you're different, somehow."

< If only you knew *how* different... > Clark mused. "Sure, a drink would be nice - thank you."

"I thought we could still order that takeout?" Lois suggested tentatively, unsure whether Clark would prefer simply to have a quick glass with her and then leave. He had told her he wasn't married; that didn't mean that there wasn't a woman in his life with whom he would prefer to spend the evening. But he agreed quickly, and good-humouredly suggested a few of the better local delivery services.

While they waited for their food, they sat together on the sofa and Lois enquired what Clark had said to Jack and Jimmy; she had assumed that he had simply told them that she was a little upset at being reunited with her belongings. His grimace in response was a little self-conscious, she thought: she fixed him with a mock glare and demanded, "Out with it, Kent!"

Clark bit his lip, and confessed that Lois might not like his reply. "I didn't want to tell them that you were upset - and if I'd said that anyway, Jimmy might have thought that he should be the one to stay, since he knew you from before. I only met you a few days ago."

"So?"

"I told them..." he hesitated, "I said that I... fancied you, and gave them a twenty as a bribe to leave me alone with you."

Lois stared at him, and was amused to see a red flush creep up her new colleague's cheeks. < He can blush!> she thought in amazement. < Is he really so innocent - or maybe he does... like me?>

"Lois - "

"Clark - "

They spoke together; then Clark held up his hand for permission to speak. His voice was low but assured. "Look, Lois, I'm sorry if I embarrassed you. And after what - almost happened yesterday morning at work... well, I'll be honest. I do find you attractive. But you needn't worry. I have no intention of taking advantage of you in any way by being here this evening."

Intrigued by his honesty, Lois found her voice. "That's... very sweet of you, Clark. And - well, I find you attractive too. But - "

"But you've been through a nightmare experience, you're not over it yet, and you're not interested in getting involved with anyone," Clark finished for her.

Lois was hesitant. "Maybe - I don't know."

"That's OK," Clark assured her. "I won't pressure you at all - but if and when you feel like dating again, I'm available. In the meantime, I'd really like to be your friend, if you'd like that."

Lois's emotions were in turmoil. First, the shock of coming across the unwelcome reminder of how stupidly cocky her younger self had been, then this - a man to whom she was *very* attracted letting her know that he felt the same way, and was willing to give her what time she needed until she was ready to return his attentions. How had he

understood so easily, without need for her to say anything, her hesitation at becoming involved with anyone - her fear, she admitted, of feeling close to another human being?

Tears pricking her eyes again, she leaned towards Clark and kissed his cheek briefly. "Thanks for understanding - you're pretty smart, Farmboy."

Clark returned her salute with a brief, one-armed hug, before getting to his feet. "And you're beautiful as well as intelligent, city girl," he murmured with a wink as he busied himself preparing plates for their food, in order to give Lois an opportunity to compose herself.

Over dinner, Clark deliberately sat on the other sofa and maintained an uncomplicated conversation about university and first jobs. Later, over coffee, he ventured a question which had been on his mind since he had seen her file. "I know the Planet's written up the story of your survival and so on - but are you ever going to go back to the original investigation?"

Lois froze momentarily; this was a question which she had been avoiding ever since her return. "I... don't know," she admitted eventually. "I'm not sure there was a story there any more - it was four years ago."

Clark studied Lois's expression thoughtfully; he had a very strong feeling that there was more to this.

Lois caught Clark watching her, and realised that she was going to get away with very little. She contemplated simply ignoring him, and perhaps suggesting that she was tired and would like to go to bed; but something inside her told her that perhaps it was time she discussed this. But with Clark Kent - a man she barely knew? Yet... the idea did not seem so preposterous. Clark was like no man she had ever met before. Lois somehow knew instinctively that he would not only be willing to listen, but would understand. And she also knew that anything she told him here would not get repeated back at the Planet.

Dragging her hands thorough her hair, she swivelled to face Clark. "I don't know what it is about you, but something tells me I can trust you," she said abruptly.

His expression serious, Clark replied softly, "Hey, anyone at the Planet will tell you, I'm the original Boy Scout."

< They had> Lois reflected. < A perfect gentleman, great sense of humour, good team player, great writer, compassionate... but also a loner. Now why is that?>

"OK, I trust you," she replied baldly. "There may be more to this story, but..." She trailed off, staring at her fingers for a long moment, then continued in a faint, hesitant voice. "The truth is, I'm not sure I can do it." She was silent for a long moment, then stared at Clark again. "I couldn't tell Perry that - why was I able to tell you?"

Clark had been taken aback at Lois's admission, but tried not to show it. In response to her question, however, he said as if thinking

aloud, "I'm not sure - maybe you don't feel you have as much to prove to me? After all, you're as experienced a reporter as I am, and I'm well aware of your reputation - and in awe of it. Perry is the editor, after all, and if everything I've heard is true, he's been your mentor in journalism."

Lois was thoughtful for a moment. "Yeah, I guess that's true. But - I've **always** felt as if I needed to prove myself to everyone. I never would have admitted to any sort of weakness before..."

"That may be true," Clark acknowledged, "but the kind of experience you went through would change anyone. I know a lot of people were amazed you came back to the Planet."

"Maybe I shouldn't have," Lois whispered.

"**What*??*" Clark demanded. "Are you joking? That would be... a real waste of talent."

Lois stared at him - how had he heard her? He was sitting several feet away on the other sofa, and she had barely whispered her words. But she was immediately struck by his expression: it was obvious from the sheer incredulity on his face that he genuinely believed what he had said to be true. She realised that she had to pull herself together, and fought for composure.

When she finally recommenced speaking, her voice was matter-of-fact, almost without inflection; Clark felt that she might have been speaking of anyone but herself. "Four years ago I was on the track of what I thought was a great story. A leading Metropolis businessman was in fact involved in some very dirty gangland activities, and was supplying the criminal underworld with arms smuggled in from an African state."

"The Congo," Clark supplied.

With a brief nod, Lois continued. "I'd got the tip-off from a very reliable source, and I spent weeks checking it out - all the notes and evidence I had at the time are in that box over there. When I thought I had enough to prove that there was something suspicious - including a tape recording - I went to Perry and said I had to go to the Congo to check out that side of things, and maybe get absolute confirmation that - **he** - the businessman I mentioned - was the man involved. Perry sent Pete with me.

"The problem was, I was too sure of myself. I made an **elementary** mistake - I didn't cover my tracks. I just assumed that I'd been careful and that no-one was on to the investigation. That ambush where Pete was killed?" She paused, and Clark, listening intently, merely nodded. "That wasn't just the horrible accident I told everyone. It was deliberate - they were lying in wait for us, they knew who we were, and they had instructions to kill us."

Whatever Clark had been expecting to hear, this was not it. He had suspected that almost getting killed and losing four years of her life was making Lois wonder if she had lost her nerve; but he was shocked to discover that since returning to Metropolis she had been concealing the fact of a deliberate attempt on her life four years earlier.

"You're sure about this?" he asked quickly.

Lois nodded. "Some of the men spoke English - with New Troy accents. I heard our names mentioned. The only explanation had to be that the man I was after knew we'd gone out there and had sent people to kill us."

"You *have* told the police, Lois?" Clark demanded, fixing her with a hard stare which, Lois realised, altered his features considerably. But again she shook her head. "Why not, for heaven's sake?" Clark retorted, on the verge of shouting in frustration. He was now leaning forward on the sofa, his eyes burning into Lois's with, she thought abstractedly, almost the power of lasers.

"I... can't. Didn't want to," she whispered, her eyes dropping to her hands, which rested on her lap, tightly clenched.

Clark recognised the note in her voice, and his own tone was gentler. "You're afraid that this man... whoever he is... will come after you again?" An almost imperceptible nod. "But Lois, if you tell the police you can have protection - which you probably need. After all, if he knows you're back he could already be after you!"

Lois looked up and gave a wry smile. "I know. I suppose I've been trying to put it out of my mind - but finding that file this evening just brought it all back to me. I think..." She hesitated, then got to her feet and paced to the far side of the room and back again. "You know, I guess I'm just ashamed to admit that I'm scared of something. You didn't know me in the old days, Clark... They called me Mad Dog Lane at the Planet - there was almost nothing I wouldn't do to get a story. And I've been in life-threatening situations before without it bothering me too much. This time... for some reason, it's different. And I just... don't like... to let people see I'm... scared." Despite struggling to remain calm, her voice broke on the final word and she turned away from Clark.

Clark inhaled deeply before speaking; he too rose to his feet and went to stand behind Lois, resting his hands comfortably on her shoulders. "Everyone gets scared sometimes, you know," he remarked softly. "And it really doesn't mean you're a coward. It just means that you don't actually want to die for the sake of a story. And you know, I think that's a pretty sensible approach."

Lois listened to Clark's words; somehow the reassuring timbre of his voice and the feel of his body close to hers lent her strength and comfort. She turned, and giving him another wry smile she commented, "I guess you're right. I've been bottling this up for too long. I need to finish this investigation."

"I think you do too," Clark agreed. "Look, Lois, I know it's your story, but if you want any help...?"

Lois hesitated; her first instinct had been simply to insist that it was *her* story and she didn't want anyone else working on it. But common sense reminded her that Clark had the advantage of more recent knowledge of the Metropolis crime scene - quite impressive knowledge, judging by his Planet articles - and that it was possible that she was too close to the story, in which case a more detached assistant could be helpful. Nodding thoughtfully, she replied eventually, "Yes, I guess that could be useful."

"OK then - when you're ready, maybe we could go through your notes and decide where to start," Clark proposed. "One thing though... you mentioned a businessman - who?"

"I didn't say?" Lois was surprised to realise that she had not told Clark the name of the man she believed wanted her dead. "William Brentford - the owner of..."

"BrentCo, I know," Clark finished. His eyes had widened in surprise at the name. "Lois, he's dead!"

"What!" Lois stared at Clark in shock. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah - it happened not long after I started at the Planet... I'd guess a little under three years ago. He was on a sailing holiday somewhere - Bermuda, I think... he fell overboard and drowned. I remember because I was involved in writing one of the follow-ups."

Lois sat down slowly. "So... my life isn't in danger after all."

Resuming his seat opposite her, Clark replied, "Looks like it - as long as Brentford's criminal activities were wound up at the same time as his legit ones. But what I can't understand is that if he was involved in anything criminal, why it didn't come out after his death."

"I'm not surprised," Lois commented, gradually recovering from her shock. "Brentford is... was a very dangerous man, and he covered his tracks very carefully. I didn't tell you that the snitch who gave me the tip-off was found dead a few days later - I guess that should have warned me that I might have been sussed. I should think that too many people stood to lose if Brentford's activities became public knowledge."

"Yeah?" Clark was suddenly thoughtful. "In that case... I wonder whether his death really was an accident?"

"We need to check it out." Lois was suddenly in businesslike mood. "Tomorrow - you get Jack to call up the files on the drowning, and anything else he can find about where Brentford was, who was with him and so on."

"Will do," Clark agreed. He glanced at his watch, jumping to his feet almost instantly. "I'd better go - it's late, and apart from anything else I have to take the van back." He picked up his leather jacket and Lois accompanied her to the door of her apartment. As he was about to open the door, she touched his arm lightly to stop him.

"Clark, I want to... thank you for being so understanding," she said sincerely. "I was getting myself into kind of a mess over what happened, and you really helped me to make sense of it."

He smiled in return, a genuine, friendly, heart-warming smile. "Hey, no problem, Lois - and you don't have to worry, no-one at the Planet will hear anything about any of this. Oh, and I'll tell Jimmy and Jack that you knocked me back, too, so you needn't worry about any

other gossip in the newsroom."

Lois shook her head, a disbelieving smile on her lips. "You really are a boy scout, Kent." She touched his arm. "Thank you."

"You're very welcome," he told her. "Oh, and another thing - I think you're one hell of a journalist, and I'm looking forward to seeing your byline back in the Planet. Which reminds me - do you want me to ask Superman if he's willing to be interviewed by you?"

"You don't mind? I know he's a friend of yours - I thought maybe you wouldn't want me talking to him."

"Why?" Clark's face revealed complete lack of guile. "I know you want to ask some hard questions, but I also know that Superman doesn't have anything to hide. So I'm not worried about what a Lane interrogation would produce," he finished with a grin. "Let me see what I can do."

"Here's the information you wanted, CK," Jack said briefly as he dropped a stack of papers on Clark's desk. Lois quickly came over and began to search through the documents and print-offs with Clark. However, nothing appeared to either of them to suggest that there might be anything remotely suspicious about Brentford's death.

"Hey, the yacht he was on is registered to Lex Luthor," Clark commented in surprise after a while.

Lois looked up from her perusal of Brentford's itinerary. "So...? He and Brentford probably did business together. Luthor has interests in just about every area of commerce there is: LexCorp, LexComm, Luthor Industries, LNN, LexLabs and so on. It was probably a sweetener for some deal or other."

"Yeah," Clark agreed. "It just seems a little strange that we're already looking at Luthor's connections with Mayor Leeson. But I guess it's just a coincidence."

"Hmm - I guess it must be," Lois replied, already dismissing the question. "Why do you think he was in Bermuda anyway?"

Back at her own desk later, Lois was assembling some of her notes for the Superman article when her phone rang. A voice at the other end was recognisable as one of her old contacts, a petty criminal who occasionally passed on information to journalists for small cash rewards. "Lois? I heard you were back in town - and that you're still interested in the gun-running thing."

He had successfully got Lois's attention. "Yes?"

Clark's ears pricked up at the tone of Lois's voice; he glanced up and saw her listening intently to the telephone. With a faint twinge of guilt, he activated his super-hearing, in time to hear Lois arrange a rendezvous at an address a few miles from the Planet. Clark was aware that it could be completely legitimate, and that Lois was not only capable of looking after herself, but also was highly likely to resent his interference. Still... He grabbed his suit jacket and

exited the building a discreet distance behind Lois.

"It's arranged?"

"Yes, sir. Apparently she took the bait with great ease. He didn't have to use any degree of persuasion."

"Excellent, Nigel." The speaker took a puff of his fat cigar and leaned back in his chair, exhaling a large blue smoke ring which drifted upwards and floated past the top of his head. A broad smile lit up his features as he met his assistant's eye. "And our go-between?"

Lex Luthor's assistant, a tall, balding man sporting a goatee beard, with aristocratic features and an educated English accent to match, allowed himself a thin smile. "Already dealt with."

"Excellent. Time for lunch, I think."

Lois paced up and down the temporary walkway beside the condemned building where Mitch, her informant, had assured her that he would meet her, bringing some crucial information. He should have been there five minutes ago, but there was still no sign. For about the thirtieth time she consulted her watch, before deciding that she would give him another two minutes before leaving. If only she hadn't sent away her taxi... The building was in a seedy area of town, and there was no-one in sight.

From his position in a doorway just around the corner, Clark checked the area with his X-ray vision once again. It was beginning to look as if this had been a complete waste of time - no-one had shown up to meet Lois, and she certainly didn't appear to be in any danger. Other than in danger of losing her temper, he mused with a grin as his super-hearing caught yet more irate mutterings about time-wasters.

Suddenly, his super-hearing picked up something else. It sounded like... the scraping of stonework moving, Clark realised in shock, and he immediately propelled himself around the corner. As he did, he saw a large piece of masonry falling from the top of the condemned building, headed directly for where Lois was now standing, glaring at her watch once again.

There was no time to change into Superman, or to warn her; she wouldn't be able to move fast enough, he calculated grimly. But he could; running at near super-speed, he reached Lois, grabbing her and pulling her off the temporary walkway and onto the road just before the lump of stonework crashed through the walkway and down into the channel below.

Breathing heavily, her eyes wide with shock, Lois stared at Clark. "What... happened?"

"You were nearly killed," he replied soberly, his arms still holding her tightly. She struggled a little, and he released her; she

approached the remains of the now-shattered walkway and looked down to see the large stone lying in the shallow water.

Turning to Clark, Lois said shakily, "That would have made kind of a large dent in my skull."

He nodded, hands thrust into his pockets.

Lois suddenly realised that she had left Clark behind at the Planet. "What were you doing here?"

Thinking quickly, Clark replied, "I noticed your expression when you were on the phone, and I thought you said something about Brentford - I can lip-read a bit," he ad-libbed, seeing her expression of surprise. "I know it was none of my business unless you chose to make it, but I just had a kind of uncomfortable feeling about it, so I followed you."

"I didn't see you!"

"Remember those old detective movies? 'Follow that cab, but stay out of sight'? I figured that if nothing happened, you'd be none the wiser." Clark was aware that Lois might well resent his interference, and was trying his best not to alienate her.

But Lois was still thinking about what might have happened had Clark not been there. "It's just as well you did - I didn't even see that thing, and by the time I had it would've been too late."

A sober expression on his face, Clark studied the top of the building; he could clearly see the gap around the edge of the roof area where the slab had come from. He turned to Lois. "Are you going to be OK getting back to the Planet?"

"Aren't you coming?"

"No - there's something I want to do here first. Go on - and try to find out what it was your snitch wanted to tell you. I'll see you in a while."

As Lois walked back towards the nearest main road to flag down a cab, Clark lowered his glasses and began to examine the roof more closely.

Clark returned to the newsroom just as Lois replaced her telephone receiver; as he headed for her desk, she called to him in frustration, "I can't get hold of that damned Mitch anywhere!"

His face grim, Clark perched on the edge of Lois's desk. "That stone falling wasn't an accident, Lois. Superman took a look up on the roof and he said there are definitely marks which indicate that someone worked it loose and pushed it off the edge."

Lois's jaw dropped. Closing it quickly, she ejaculated, "But - Brentford's dead, so who...?"

"That's what we need to find out," Clark replied. "But first, you need to call the police."

Just as Lois was reaching for the telephone, Jack hurried over. "Lois? You were looking for a guy called Mitch, right? I heard on the police scanner that someone answering his description was just found near the Hobbs River area - sounded like he'd been hit by a truck."

Down at the precinct, Lois had completed her statement and was talking to a detective Clark appeared to know quite well.

"Look, Ms Lane, I hear what you're saying to me about this weapons smuggling investigation, but that was four years ago, and the man you thought was behind it is dead. If someone is trying to kill you, I really don't see how it could have anything to do with that." The detective's voice was growing impatient as he reached the end of his mini-lecture.

Clark came forward, his arm thrust out emphatically. "Henderson, we've told you that the informant who called Lois used her gun-running investigation as bait to get her there. So that would suggest there is a link, don't you think?"

Henderson shrugged. "Who knows? The guy certainly can't tell us himself, not now he's on a mortuary slab."

"Henderson, the man who lured Lois there is dead! Doesn't that suggest to you that someone is after her?" Clark was now very angry; Lois, watching him, was surprised at the change in her mild-mannered reporter colleague.

"The guy got run over - the most we have there is a hit-and-run," Henderson replied in a bored tone. "And I would deduce that getting run over is what prevented him from meeting you, Ms Lane."

"Oh yeah? So the Hobbs River area is on the way from the south side to Milton Street?" Lois demanded.

"And do you know that he was over on the south side when he called you, Ms Lane? Did he give you his address?" Henderson's tone was sarcastic.

"Well, no, but... He always hung around a bar over there!"

"Sure - four years ago!" Henderson appeared to think that he had landed a winning blow. "Look, we have a couple of witnesses who saw him around the River area earlier this morning. End of story. We're looking for a hit-and-run driver, possibly a truck driver given the nature of the injuries. That's it. And as for your near-accident, there are warning notices by that building for a good reason. You just found out why."

Clark was by now furious. "Henderson, I told you Superman thinks that stone was deliberately worked loose and pushed."

"And he can prove it?" The detective was sceptical.

"He said that anyone looking closely at the surrounding stonework could see scrape-marks. And the rest of the edge is secure - it's odd

that only one piece would be so loose that it would come down of its own accord, wouldn't you say?"

Henderson paused, his mouth turning down at the corners. "Hmm - maybe. But I can't authorise any of my people to go up on that roof - I'm not putting their lives at risk like that."

"How about I get Superman to take someone up - or take some photographs?" Clark suggested.

"Maybe," Henderson agreed. "But for now... Ms Lane, I'm not dismissing your allegation altogether, but I can't spare anyone for something as speculative as this... incident. Let me know if anything else happens - and don't go visiting any more condemned buildings."

"I can't *believe* Henderson was so unconcerned!" Clark exclaimed as he flagged down a cab to take them back to the Planet.

Lois shrugged. "Maybe it was an accident after all."

Clark swung around to face her. "Do you really believe that? It had to be a set-up - particularly with your snitch winding up dead. That was highly convenient, wouldn't you say? Anyway, Superman says the stone was pushed."

"Yeah, you said. So, is he a forensics expert too?"

Clark sighed. "Is that your defence against taking anything seriously, Lois - sarcasm?"

Hands on her hips, Lois faced him. "What's it to you, anyway, Clark Kent?"

"I'm only the guy who saved your life this morning!" he retorted.

"So what do you want - lifetime slavery to your every command?" Anyone who had known Lois Lane for more than a few weeks would have known to be very wary at that particularly scathing tone of voice.

Clark laughed in genuine amusement, his annoyance disappearing. "That'd be good for a start."

Lois glared at him, then almost against her will joined in his laughter. "Clark, don't think I'm not grateful for what you did this morning. I just wonder whether... whether we're not making too much of a big deal of this," she added as soon as the laughter had died away.

"I don't think we are, Lois," Clark replied quietly. "I think someone wants to kill you."

Raising an eyebrow at him, Lois responded in a sardonic tone, "Then since the police won't protect me, I'll just have to rely on you, won't I?"

"What do you mean, it didn't work?" The speaker, a tall, thin man, took advantage of the shadow cast by the LexHarbour sign to avoid revealing his identity to his companion.

"I dunno what happened! She was underneath, and I pushed the stone straight off - it should have hit her! She would have had no time to get out of the way, even if she'd seen it coming."

"Didn't you watch to see what happened?" The English accent was clipped, impatient.

"Course not! Couldn't take the risk that anyone might see me - I got outta there as soon as it was falling!"

"And you failed." The tone was hard, cold.

"OK, it didn't work this time, but I can try again." The hired killer's voice took on a whining quality.

"And you really think that the woman will fall for that trick a second time? She's certain to know by now that her informant is dead."

"But... Hey! What's going on!"

The sunlight reflected brightly off the nozzle of a black revolver which was suddenly directed at the would-be killer's chest. His cries of protest were lost in the muffled sound of the gun firing; he spun backwards and fell, face down, in the flagged area just in front of the harbour edge. Checking first to ensure that the area was still deserted - LexHarbour was not yet open for commercial activity - Nigel St John stepped forward out of the shadows and kicked the still-dying man into the river. He sank quickly underneath the deep waters, and the gun was allowed to fall from St John's gloved fingers to follow its victim to the river bed.

Driving away from the scene a few minutes later, St John selected a scrambled line from his car-phone and dialled. The call was answered on the second ring; the voice simply enquiring, "Executed?"

"Yes, sir," St John drawled smoothly, his accent and demeanour suggesting someone who would not be out of place in any of the famous gentlemen's clubs in Pall Mall, London. "The evidence is also disposed of."

"And the... other potential evidence, Nigel?"

"I will be paying Ms Lane's apartment a visit later this evening, sir."

"Excellent." Lex Luthor replaced the receiver, and turned in his swivel chair to face the floor-length window of his penthouse office. "Excellent," he repeated softly to himself, reaching for a cigar.

Back at the Planet later that afternoon, Clark approached Lois at her

desk. "Leeson and Maxwell are both addressing a Chamber of Commerce meeting at five o'clock. I'm covering it - want to come?"

Lois threw Clark a suspicious glance: was this simply a means of ensuring that he would be able to keep an eye on her? He had ignored her obvious sarcasm earlier and taken her remark about protecting her at face value. She supposed that if it wasn't so patronising she might almost be flattered at having this not bad-looking - OK, *very* not bad-looking! - male taking such pains over her safety. But on the other hand, she was supposed to be working with him on the election story, and this would provide a good opportunity to see the candidates in action.

They took a taxi to the Chamber of Commerce building, and on showing their press passes were admitted with the other journalists covering the event. The candidates were making a final pre-election appeal to the business community of Metropolis; ostensibly for votes and endorsement, but the usual sub-text to these events was fund-raising, Clark had explained in the taxi. Lois, who had not covered a mayoral election before but considered herself not exactly inexperienced in coverage of political events, had simply nodded.

While Clark took notes during the speeches and questions from business leaders, Lois occupied herself in gaining an impression of the candidates and their entourage. She finally admitted to herself that she had never seen Leeson before; this disappointed her, as she had wondered whether the nagging impression she had experienced about the campaign had its roots in something she perhaps knew about the outgoing Mayor. Neither had she ever come across the challenger, Philip Maxwell, but she found herself impressed by his quiet competence and his refusal to get drawn into the usual political mudslinging.

According to what they knew of her, Mayor Leeson was in her late forties, although her immaculate make-up and expensive hairstyle contributed to the appearance of a woman at least six years younger. The absence of lines around the eyes and mouth were not necessarily any indication of youth, given the availability of cosmetic surgery. This was a woman who was well acquainted with an image consultant, Lois guessed. Her hair, make-up and clothes were well co-ordinated to suggest competence, experience and warmth; Lois made a sarcastic note to herself to check Leeson's bank account for a standing order made payable to Color Me Beautiful. Her perfectly-coiffed auburn hair toned well with her leaf-green designer suit, and her make-up used shades of rust and bronze which highlighted her hazel eyes.

The mayor had probably also received substantial training in elocution and delivery, judging by the perfectly-timed pauses, her warm smiles, and the eye contact which she made at numerous intervals with different members of her audience. It was like watching a consummate professional at work, Lois thought; and while this wasn't unusual in a politician, this woman was a city mayor. Not a Senator or a State governor...unless, of course, Lois reflected, Leeson had ambitions in that direction. That wasn't impossible. But this was also a woman with no history of political involvement or activity of any sort before she had announced her candidacy for the previous election campaign, three years before. Lois knew - or had known before she had gone to the Congo, she reminded herself - many career politicians who were nowhere near as audience-aware and as competent at delivering a speech for the maximum effect as this woman.

As the candidates left at the end of the meeting, Lois, on a sudden impulse, hurried out of the conference room in their wake. Taken by surprise, Clark attempted to follow her but found his way blocked by senior Chamber of Commerce members and the candidates' accompanying security personnel, all bent on getting to the private drinks reception in the upstairs suite. When he finally managed to escape the conference room, he glanced around anxiously for Lois without success; just as he was reaching for his glasses to slide them down his nose and use his X-ray vision, a hand tugged at his arm.

Looking around, he saw Lois. "Where did you - ?" he began.

Interrupting, Lois demanded, "Look - over there! Who's that talking to Leeson?"

Clark followed the direction of her gaze, and saw Mayor Leeson standing huddled in a corner, partly hidden by some foliage, and talking to a tall, well-dressed man. The man's grey, thinning hair suggested that he was in his late fifties, if not older. Clark frowned; the mayor appeared to be attempting to hide from view. Pulling his glasses down discreetly, Clark took a closer look. He was puzzled by what he saw: the mayor appeared to be pleading with her companion, who seemed to be in control of the discussion. He was about to activate his super-hearing to get some idea of what was going on when Lois spoke again.

"Well? Who is he?"

Clark adjusted his glasses and turned to face Lois. "I *have* seen him before - he's been with her on the campaign trail once or twice and in the background at some press conferences - I never paid him much attention because I just assumed he was an aide or researcher of some sort. I don't know his name, but I'm sure we can find out."

"Why would she be trying to hide if she's just talking to one of her campaign staff?" Lois demanded.

Clark shrugged. "I have no idea - and I'll tell you something else, that was no ordinary conversation. Judging by their body language, they were arguing - and *she* was the one on the losing end."

"How could you tell that?! I have twenty-twenty vision and I couldn't see - you wear glasses!" Lois was sceptical.

"Uh - strong prescription," Clark said quickly, adding in an attempt to deflect Lois's interest, "Let's get back to the Planet - if he's been on Leeson's campaign team he'll probably show up in some photos and we can identify him."

Back in the newsroom, Clark asked the paper's photographers to provide him with every photo they could find which had been taken as part of their coverage of Leeson's campaign. Jimmy hurried up to Clark's desk a short time afterwards, bearing sheets of proofs and a number of fully-developed photographs.

"What are you trying to find?" the young photographer enquired,

wondering whether he could help; although he enjoyed his photographic work, he still harboured dreams of becoming an investigative journalist like his senior colleagues.

"Hmm?" Clark was already busy scanning the prints. "Oh - someone who might be working with the Mayor. Lois!" he added urgently. "That's him, isn't it?"

"Huh?" Lois, who had been lost in thought, sat upright and then looked carefully at the photograph Clark was holding out to her. "Yeah - that's him all right," she agreed.

"You all right?" Clark was concerned; he thought that Lois had been very quiet since they had left the Chamber of Commerce building.

Shaking herself out of her introspection, Lois nodded. "Sure - I was just thinking... I'm *positive* I've seen him before, but I can't remember where."

"Well, let's identify him for now," Clark suggested. "Jimmy? You still know how to use that ID program on the computer?"

"Sure, CK - who do you want me to find?"

After some searching, they had a name for their mystery man. "Nigel St John," Lois mused aloud. "Nope - means nothing to me."

"So who is he - and why should the Mayor be intimidated by him?" Clark wondered.

Jimmy was still using the computer. "His employment record states that he works for Lex Luthor."

"Luthor Industries? Or LexCorp?" Clark enquired, interested.

"No, Luthor directly," Jimmy replied. "Least, that's what it looks like. "His job title is just 'personal assistant'."

"So what is Luthor's personal assistant doing working on the Mayor's re-election campaign team?" Lois demanded, her eyes shining as she thought that they were onto something interesting.

"Looks like we were right to investigate Luthor's dealings with the City Council," Clark agreed. "Jimmy, can you find anything else? What did this St John do before working for Luthor?"

"There's nothing on this database, CK," Jimmy said regretfully. "All I can see is that he's a British national who holds a work permit requested by Luthor Industries. There's no employment record up to about eight years ago when he started working for Luthor."

Clark looked thoughtful. "Can you access any British databanks? I'd like to know something about this guy's background."

Jimmy pressed a few more keys. "I'll try, but I know the British don't have such comprehensive databases - something to do with civil liberties apparently. And their government information systems aren't as advanced as ours."

"Well, keep at it, Jimmy," Clark requested, moving away from the younger man's desk. "Let us know if you find anything."

"What now?" Lois asked as they crossed the newsroom.

Clark's expression was thoughtful. "I'm not sure - what I still can't figure out is why an employee of Lex Luthor's is apparently working with the Mayor. I'd also love to know what they were arguing about... I just wish I could have heard what they were saying," he muttered to himself.

"Yeah, me too, but we were too far away," Lois brushed aside his comment. "But what's bugging me is I *know* I've seen this St John before. I just wish I could remember..." She dropped into Clark's chair; he raised an eyebrow in amusement at her presumption, but suggested coffee. Lois nodded, the direction of her gaze turning to the coffee machine. As Clark grabbed two mugs and proceeded to pour coffee into them, Lois jumped to her feet.

"That's it!"

Several heads turned to stare at her. "What is?" chorused several voices

"Is something wrong, Lois?" Clark asked, concerned, as she reached him. He hastily replaced the mugs on the table and turned to face Lois as she gripped his upper arms.

"Clark, I've remembered! It was the coffee - it reminded me... Espresso... the Expressway... I followed Brentford to a diner by the Expressway turnoff at 34th Street. He was meeting with a couple of guys - they gave him money, and I was hiding, watching through binoculars and I had a camera - I took pictures, but there was one guy who was sort of in the background and I couldn't identify him. I think it was St John!"

"Hey, slow down, Lois!" Clark cautioned, trying to suppress a smile; Jimmy had told him about what he called Lois's 'babble mode', but this was the first time Clark had experienced it. He had managed to follow the tale, however, and he took Lois's arm and led her away from the curious glances of her colleagues. Fixing Lois with an intent stare, he spoke slowly and distinctly. "Lois, are you telling me that an employee of Lex Luthor - the guy's personal assistant - was involved in illegal activities four years ago?"

The intensity of Clark's gaze, and the serious tone of his voice, took Lois by surprise, but she answered with equal seriousness. "As far as I know, yes. I'm almost positive that was him."

"Do you still have the photos you took?" Clark asked, a tiny muscle twitching in his jaw.

"Yes - they're all in my files, at my apartment," she confirmed. "Hey, Clark, I know that this seems to be turning into one hell of a story, but do you always get so worked up about your investigations?"

Clark sighed, and told himself to relax. "No - not always," he admitted. "This... is different. Look," he added in a different tone, "why don't we go to your apartment and collect your files, then go

through them at my place? I'll make us something to eat - it's getting late, and I don't know about you, but I'm hungry."

Lois considered; quite apart from the fact that this investigation was suddenly becoming extremely exciting with the discovery of a possible link between Clark's election story and her gun-running investigation, which was an excellent reason to continue working on it tonight, there was the prospect of spending more time with Clark Kent outside the Planet and away from their professional responsibilities. She hadn't forgotten the previous evening; it had surprised her that she had confided so much in Kent... but somehow, she didn't regret having told him so much about herself, and she knew, without needing his assurances, that he would not betray her. Added to that was the fact that he had told her, without any prompting but with some obvious embarrassment, that he found her attractive. That was... very flattering, whether or not she had any interest in reciprocating that attraction. She eyed Clark surreptitiously, letting her gaze travel up and down his body, from that gloriously thick dark hair which she suddenly wished she could run her fingers through, down to his deep brown eyes and full, sensuous lips... how would it feel to have those on her own, she wondered, remembering those few moments a couple of days ago when he had so nearly kissed her. And that chest, and the muscles in those arms... down to his narrow hips... great backside... and... well, she would have to leave the rest to her imagination.

Forcing herself to return to reality, she faced Clark and said brightly, "Why not? We could stay at my place, I guess, and order another takeout - I'm afraid I'm not much of a cook..." She laughed in an attempt to hide her sudden nervousness.

Clark, who had not missed Lois's survey of his body, smiled to himself. < Looks like maybe she does find me attractive...> He allowed himself to speculate on the possibility of kissing Lois again... for the first time as Clark, he reminded himself; Lois had no idea about the man underneath the Superman costume. < Perhaps a goodnight kiss after I walk her home> he considered.

Keeping his voice steady and neutral, he suggested, "No, you haven't seen my apartment yet - and I enjoy cooking, it'd be nice to cook for someone else for a change." He waited for Lois to collect her belongings, then, offering her his arm, he grabbed his jacket and led the way to the elevator.

As they walked together up the steps towards Lois's apartment, Clark explained about his elation over discovering the tenuous link between Brentford and Luthor. "You see, Lois, I've been trying to get something on Luthor for more than two years. I told you the other day that I suspected that his public image was just a front, a facade, and that there was something unsavoury going on. What I didn't say is that Superman thinks that too, though there's never been any evidence he was able to produce to back it up. He told me about his suspicions, though."

"Superman did?" Lois was taken aback. "He - tells you things like that? Just how close are you two?"

"Oh... ah... fairly close, I guess," Clark replied with forced

casualness, reminding himself that he really had to be very careful around Lois Lane. "But you see now why I was so pleased to find that we might actually have something on Luthor at last."

Lois tossed back her glossy hair and raised her eyebrows archly at Clark before unlocking her apartment door. "*We* have something on Luthor? The gun-running story is mine, remember."

Was this his first glimpse of the ruthless Lois Lane, Clark wondered? He had heard stories of her relentless determination in obtaining stories before, her passionate struggle never to be scooped. One of Clark's colleagues had once related a tale in which he had been stupid enough to remind Lois that what they were doing was journalism, not war. Lois had replied, "Your problem is you think there's a difference."

Smiling now as he remembered this anecdote, Clark spread his hands. "Yep. Sure. The gun-running story is yours - and the Mayoral one is mine. See, in your investigation all you've got is Luthor's assistant linked to Brentford; in mine, we have something, however tentative, to tie Luthor directly to Leeson."

Lois swung around to face Clark again, wagging her index finger at him. "We. You said *we*. I'm with you on the political story, remember."

"Sure you are," Clark agreed. "And I wouldn't want it any other way."

Lois, warring with her competitive instincts, finally acknowledged, "Neither would I. I wouldn't even have had the nerve to pick up my story again without you."

"You didn't have any choice in the end, Lois - it came to you," Clark reminded her. "And in case you think I've forgotten, I still want to make sure that whoever wants you dead doesn't succeed." His manner had again grown serious during the latter part of his short speech, and he reached out and touched Lois's face very lightly with his index finger, drawing it down her cheek towards her jawline.

Frozen into immobility, Lois could only stare at him. < Why doesn't he just kiss me and get it over with?> she asked herself in incredulity. There was a tension in the air again, and as she met Clark's soft brown eyes Lois felt that there was nothing she would like better than to be swept off her feet into his strong arms. < Why am I behaving like some dreamy-eyed heroine from a romantic novel?> she asked herself, amazed. But Clark stepped backwards, breaking the atmosphere. "Come on - you want to get those files, and we can get on over to my place?"

"Oh..." Lois struggled to bring herself back to reality. Playing for time, she said, "Mind if I have a quick shower and get changed first? It's been kind of a long day... I'll be fifteen minutes, just make yourself at home." As Clark settled himself on her sofa with a magazine he'd found on the coffee-table, Lois escaped into the bedroom and tried to calm her unruly thoughts.

Lois had been very pleasantly surprised at Clark's cooking; expecting

a fairly basic steak and salad, which would have represented about the culinary limit of any other male she knew, she had expressed amazement when, after showering and changing in what she considered to be record time, he had swiftly prepared a Chinese stirfry with noodles. Over dinner, they had swapped more college anecdotes, Lois doing her best to find out more about what made her temporary partner tick. Afterwards, Clark had suggested they save the remainder of the wine for later - if Lois wanted it - and had made fresh coffee for them to drink while going through her files.

She had also been surprised at his apartment. Thinking about it, she admitted to herself that she had been expecting some sort of playboy bachelor pad, given this man's obvious good looks; instead, Clark had made the most of the natural features of his loft, such as the exposed natural brick, and added a number of homely touches such as throw rugs, posters, family photographs and books. His chairs and sofa also appeared to be provided with comfort rather than seduction in mind, and he hadn't once suggested showing her his bedroom; he had merely gestured with his hand in the general direction of the bathroom before dinner, in case she needed to freshen up at some stage.

Clark Kent outside the office appeared to be as much the thoughtful gentleman as inside it, Lois mused. Same sense of humour, too, but a little more muted here, on his home territory. And the perfect host... no matter that the reason for her visit was work, he was treating her like an invited guest, with every courtesy. He looked good in casual clothes as well, she reflected. Sure, she had seen him in jeans and a shirt the previous evening, but with all the fuss of moving and the trauma of finding her investigation files, it hadn't really registered. His jeans were faded and shrunk, and clung to his hips like a second skin; it was clear that he carried no excess weight, but if he ever put on even another pound or two, the jeans would be positively indecent. On his top half, he wore a plain black cotton shirt with the initials 'cK' on the breast pocket; Calvin Klein, Lois had recognised, but she had teased him about it all the same. "Not my fault if he has the same initials as me," he had replied, with a grin and no hint of embarrassment. The top couple of buttons on his shirt were open, and Lois had on a few occasions had to remind herself *not* to stare.

Recalled to the present by Clark's amused cough, she began to open up her files, explaining her system of recording to Clark. "How do you want to do this?" she asked. "I mean, I'm pretty familiar with these, even if I haven't seen them for a few years. Want me to go through them with you and explain them?"

"Uh... it's OK," Clark said quickly. "I can speed-read - I find it pretty useful as a journalist - if you just let me start with this one..." he picked up the file containing the earliest material "...and I'll work through them myself."

They worked in silence for the best part of an hour, though neither was giving their full attention to the work. Lois found herself trying to sneak surreptitious glances at Clark, wondering yet again what it would be like to kiss him - and perhaps even do more with him. Clark was reading the files and marvelling at how this slight young woman had managed to gather so much evidence in what had clearly been very dangerous situations. Clark had never considered himself a chauvinist, believing firmly in a woman's right to succeed

in whatever career area she wanted, but he found his protective instincts firmly aroused where Lois was concerned. < It's just because I know I'm invulnerable and she's not> he told himself, though he was aware that that was only part of the truth.

Lois interrupted his introspection suddenly by yelling in triumph, "Yes!! I knew it was him - here he is!"

Clark, sitting across the table from her, got up and came to stand behind her chair. He examined the photograph: although the run-down diner was poorly lit, the man in question was in shadows in the background and the picture was obviously taken from some distance away, he believed that Lois was right. Ensuring that she was looking at the photograph and not himself, he slid his glasses down and focused for a closer look. It was Nigel St John, and...

"What's that under his jacket?" Clark asked, pointing.

"Where? I don't see anything!" Lois was sceptical.

However, Clark knew what he had seen. "Let's get that picture blown up by the labs tomorrow - I think that strap could be a shoulder-holster."

"I don't know how you could see that!" Lois protested indignantly.

"But if it is..." Clark prompted.

"If it is, then it proves he's up to no good. Why would Lex Luthor's assistant be carrying a gun if his meeting with Brentford was completely legal and above board?" Lois concluded, immediately seeing Clark's point.

"We're getting closer," Clark agreed. "But we still have a long way to go, and if we're going to expose Luthor before the election, we don't have a lot of time left."

"OK, so what now?" Lois prompted. "We could go back to the Planet - "

"What, tonight?" Clark interrupted. "Lois, I'm as keen on solving this as you are, but we deserve a little off-duty time, and you certainly need it after this morning."

< Here it comes - the seduction attempt> Lois thought, unsure whether she would resist. Did she want to? "So what do you suggest, Clark?"

Clark closed Lois's files and stacked them on the table. Looking up, he answered casually, "Well, there's still half a bottle of wine left, and it's not that late, so how 'bout we make ourselves comfortable and talk?" He gestured towards his sofa.

Expecting to be coaxed into his arms as soon as they sat, Lois was again taken by surprise when Clark seated himself at the opposite end of the large, squishy couch. He smiled at her in what was certainly not a seductive manner, and commented, "It's actually quite nice to have some company for a change and *not* talk about work."

Taken aback, Lois blurted out, "But you must bring girlfriends here - or do you go back to their place?"

Trying not to show his pleasure at her question - it seemed to suggest that she might be interested in him - Clark shook his head. "No girlfriends - not for about a year and a half."

Lois frowned: this was certainly not what she had expected. "But that would mean... your last girlfriend was your - " She broke off abruptly, realising that she was about to be indiscreet.

However, Clark simply raised an eyebrow and finished for her. "My fiancée, you mean? I take it the newsroom grapevine filled you in on that." Acknowledging Lois's nod, he smiled and added, "Don't worry, the grapevine told me a few things about you too, though I'm sure some of it's exaggerated."

Her mouth dropping open, Lois recovered her wits and protested, "Well, a lot of it is - has to be - most of it's probably complete nonsense."

Grinning now, Clark agreed. "Sure - I mean, I knew better than to believe that you actually knocked out a Secret Service agent in your rush to ask the President a question."

"What? Who said that? I never..." Lois trailed off as the expression on Clark's face told her that she had been well and truly wound up. "You... grrrrrr," she growled, grabbing a cushion and flinging it at him. He fielded it and threw it back to her.

"So... if you don't mind talking about it, why did you break up with Lana?" Lois asked, unable to contain her curiosity. How could any woman let this gorgeous man go?

"No, I don't mind - it's all water under the bridge now," Clark shrugged. "We were childhood sweethearts - went through high school and then college together, and got engaged after we graduated, but decided not to get married until we'd both got our careers well established. Then we just realised we'd grown apart and wanted different things out of life - for instance, Lana wanted to move back to Kansas, but I'd only been in Metropolis a year or so and wanted to stay. And... she wanted me to change certain - aspects - of my life, which I didn't really want to change."

"She can't have really loved you," Lois said slowly. "Otherwise she'd have wanted you the way you are."

"Yeah, but I couldn't have loved her either," Clark replied. "Otherwise I would have been more willing to do what she wanted." He took a sip of his wine, and, replacing his glass on the coffee-table, ran his hands through his hair, ruffling it. "I sometimes think, now, that getting engaged to Lana was really just about me searching for a family, someone to belong to." Seeing Lois's puzzled look, he explained, "My parents were killed in a car accident when I was ten. I was shuffled around a succession of foster-homes until I was eighteen - I never got to stay anywhere longer than about a year, so I never really felt I *belonged*. Lana was one of the few constants in my life as I grew up."

Lois's hand flew to her mouth. "Oh, I'm so *sorry*, Clark - I had no

idea! It must have been awful for you."

< Much more than you could ever realise> Clark mused. It hadn't just been the loss of his Earth parents, but also the knowledge that Martha and Jonathan Kent were the only other people who knew his secret, that he was really from another planet. Before they had been killed, his powers had been beginning to make themselves manifest, so the Kent family already knew that Clark was going to be *different*. How different, they had not known at that stage, and Clark had really missed his parents' calm acceptance and loving reassurance as he discovered new abilities throughout his teens. < All other boys have to cope with is discovering their sexuality - I had to deal with X-ray vision and realising I could fly!> he thought wryly. At least if he'd had his parents, he would have had someone to talk to about his powers, and someone to share the bad times when he just couldn't help... Suddenly finding himself tempted to explain to Lois just what he had gone through, he stopped himself abruptly, excusing himself on the pretext of visiting the bathroom.

< What were you thinking of, Kent!> he asked himself incredulously, as he splashed his face with cold water. < Telling someone you've only known a week or so that you're from another planet?!>

< But I feel as if I've known her for ever> his inner self pleaded. < She's not just any woman... she's *nothing* like Lana!>

< But you know she doesn't trust Superman. And you'd put your secret - and your safety - in her hands? Are you crazy?> Suppressing the inexplicable urge to confide in Lois, Clark re-entered the living room and suggested that, as it was late, he should see her home.

Outside, the dark night sky was clear, the stars shining brightly in their constellations and the full moon casting shadows over the buildings along their way. Lois couldn't help feeling that it presented a very romantic backdrop, but she was mystified by her companion's behaviour. Was Clark interested in her or not? He had told her that he was, and yet he'd had several opportunities this evening to make a move on her, but had not taken them. Even now, they were walking together in comfortable companionship, Lois having slipped her hand through Clark's arm, but he had not attempted to hold her any closer.

Although in so many other ways a thoroughly modern and independent woman, Lois was aware that in a few respects she was actually quite traditional; when it came to relationships with men, while she had always been determined to be at least an equal partner during the relationship, she had always left it up to the man to make the first move to turn a friendship, or a mutual attraction, into something more. She had never been the one to initiate a first kiss, or ask a man out for the first time. Just why this was so she was not entirely sure, but she suspected that a psychologist might tell her that it was all a deep-rooted insecurity stemming from an unhappy childhood in which she had never been fully confident of her parents' love. Whether or not this was true - and Lois had little time for psychology, at least with herself as the subject - she found the idea that she should perhaps be the one to make the first move with Clark intimidating.

They reached her apartment building; Lois paused and turned to face

Clark. With a shy but warm smile, she thanked him for walking her home. "I enjoyed tonight - not just the work, but... I like your place."

"Come over whenever you want, Lois," Clark invited, liking the idea that she might become a regular visitor. "Whenever you get tired of takeout, or eating alone..."

"Yeah... I'd like that," she murmured, her eyes searching his face for a sign that his invitation meant more than was implied by the words.

Reading Lois's expression as a suggestion that she might not be indifferent to him, Clark tentatively brought his free hand up to slide along her jaw and into her hair. When she didn't pull away, he lowered his head and touched his lips to hers in the briefest of caresses. Drawing back, he caught the expression of surprise - and delight - in her eyes, and, unable to resist, he slid his other arm around Lois's waist to bring her closer to him. He dipped his head again and claimed her lips in a longer, explorative kiss. He heard Lois murmur something indistinguishable against his lips, and she kissed him back with obvious pleasure, opening her mouth under his searching lips.

Nothing Clark had ever experienced before had prepared him for the intensity of his reaction to that kiss. The embraces he had shared with Lana paled into insignificance; her kisses had never affected him beyond a mild sensation of enjoyment at feeling close to a warm, affectionate human being. The occasion when he had kissed Lois as Superman had been too fleeting to allow for much sensation. Now, as every essence that was Lois seemed to flood within and around him, to his amazement he felt his head spin and his limbs gave the impression of dissolving into unsteadiness. Her indefinable scent, the sensation of her slim but shapely body pressed against his, the way their bodies seemed to... *fit* together... Clark wanted to scoop this woman into his arms and fly with her somewhere far away, where nothing could intrude upon their exploration of each other.

But real life intruded; a couple emerging from Lois's building brushed against Lois and Clark as they stood entangled by the steps leading to the door. Recovering his own balance and steadying Lois, Clark reluctantly released her. Her lips still slightly parted, she stared at him in wide-eyed silence. Unsure what to make of her silence, Clark asked hesitantly, "Are you OK, Lois?"

She swallowed and nodded; Lois had also been shocked by the intensity of her reaction to Clark's kiss. It was a long time since she had been kissed, or wanted to kiss a man; she didn't count that brief, unwanted salute from Superman the previous week. But even previous boyfriends had never made her feel quite so... bowled over, as if - she winced mentally at the cliché - the earth had actually moved beneath her feet. Even when he had released her, she had been unable to form any coherent words. She blinked now and attempted to answer him; where were they going from here? Would he now expect to be invited in?

"Uh... yeah... that was quite a kiss, Clark," she managed at last, wondering why he was no longer touching her. Hesitantly, she stretched out a hand and touched his arm. The anxious expression on Clark's face disappeared, and he covered her hand with his own.

"Sorry - I guess I forgot what I said last night about giving you time," Clark murmured apologetically.

"Don't apologise for kissing me!" Lois answered in breathless surprise. "I... it was pretty fantastic - I never expected... I... guess I just need time to decide what I want, though... and we do work together, so that might be a problem..." She trailed off, unsure quite how to tell Clark that she was definitely interested in pursuing this attraction between them, but was reluctant to become too involved just yet.

He smiled, understanding her confusion - he felt pretty shaken up himself. "Hey, I'm not asking you to move in with me or anything! And I promise I'll behave myself at work. Let's just... take things slowly and see what happens, OK?" He traced a finger gently down her cheek, then added, "I'd better get off home, I guess - I'll see you tomorrow." With that, he stepped backwards and watched her enter her building, giving a little wave as she closed the door behind her.

His mind filled with thoughts of Lois and images of her in his arms, Clark ducked into an alley a couple of blocks down the road and spun into his Super-suit. He floated upwards and took a short flight across the city in an attempt to clear his head; he needed no distractions if he was going to do his nightly patrol before going to bed. But it was difficult; all he could think about was Lois, how her body had felt pressed close to his, how sweet her lips had tasted, how their kiss had made his head spin...

Passing near his apartment a few minutes later, he heard his phone ring. He was tempted to ignore it and let the answering machine take the call, but an impulse made him land on his balcony and, with a burst of super-speed, pick up the receiver.

An anxious voice said, "Clark! Oh, you're home - I called four times..."

"Lois? What's happened?" he demanded urgently.

"Someone's been in my apartment," she replied tautly, gripping the phone tightly. Although she was still shaken, somehow the sound of Clark's voice was reassuring.

"You've been burgled?" His voice was tight, controlled.

"I'm not sure - I don't think anything's actually missing, but my things have been disturbed." Looking around her apartment yet again as she spoke, Lois took in the opened drawers and cupboards, her briefcase with the now-broken lock and the computer disk box standing open. How many floppies had been in there before she had gone out?

"Have you called the police, Lois?" Clark asked quickly.

"Yeah - they said they'd send someone over, but it wouldn't be anytime soon," Lois growled in a resigned tone. It had angered her that the police had not seemed to take her call particularly seriously once they had established that the intruder was no longer

on the premises and that nothing seemed to be missing.

"Let me make a call, and then I'll be right over," Clark promised.
"Just try not to touch anything in the meantime."

"Yeah, sure," Lois grumbled aloud to herself after she had replaced the receiver. "What am I supposed to do - stand outside in the hall? I've already touched the door, the light-switch, the telephone..."

Clark arrived so quickly that Lois was amazed; even taking into account the closeness of their respective apartments, he would have had to run at Olympic speed, she thought. However, he deflected her question on the subject by asking her to show him exactly what she had found when she'd entered her apartment. Shortly afterwards, another knock on the door surprised Lois; she was even more taken aback to find Henderson, the detective from earlier that day, on the other side. Clark, however, greeted the man, making it apparent that he was here at Clark's request. It was equally apparent to Lois that Henderson had only come as a favour to Clark; he appeared to find a simple burglary something of a waste of his time.

"So - nothing's actually been taken?" Henderson asked in a faintly impatient voice.

"Not as far as I can see..." Lois trailed off as Clark interrupted her, speaking in a clipped voice.

"Take a look, Henderson - whoever was here was looking for something. And my guess is that they didn't find it."

Both Lois and the detective stared at him. In a voice revealing only mild sarcasm, Henderson drawled, "And I suppose you're going to tell me what that thing was?"

Clark raised an eyebrow at Lois. "Some computer disks are missing, you said...?"

Inhaling sharply, Lois realised what Clark was getting at. "My files on the gun-running investigation!"

"Which were with you at my place," Clark finished, tacitly agreeing with her. And are still there, Lois realised; she had forgotten to take them with her when they had left to walk her home. < I must have been out of my mind, leaving my files on an investigation at someone else's apartment> Lois thought incredulously, but acknowledged to herself that she could trust Clark, and that in the light of this break-in it was probably safer that the files were not at her place.

Henderson, still obviously sceptical, observed, "Nice guessing Clark, but I need a bit more proof than one of your hunches."

"And how often are my hunches right?" Clark challenged, conveniently letting himself ignore the fact that many of his 'hunches' were based on discreet use of his super-powers. Lois watched this by-play between her colleague and the detective in surprise as she realised that Clark appeared to be held in some high esteem by Henderson.

"OK, OK," Henderson agreed. "But I need convincing here."

"Fair enough," Clark agreed. "Did you get Superman's statement and the photos of the roof where that slab was pushed from?" Henderson nodded. "I hope they convinced you that this morning wasn't an accident - someone made an attempt on Lois's life."

"I only looked at the pictures a short while before you called me, Clark, but they certainly look convincing," Henderson agreed. "Problem is, the source who called Lois is dead, and so is the person you believe was in charge of the arms-trafficking four years ago," he added, turning to face Lois.

Clark nodded. "Although my suspicion would be that Mitch was killed to stop him talking."

"There's no evidence for that!" Henderson snapped.

"Not yet," Clark agreed quietly but with emphasis. "Anyway, we know this morning's incident was linked to Lois's investigation. My guess is that someone is not at all happy that she made it back from the Congo alive, and that that person wants two things. Lois dead, and any notes or records of her investigation destroyed. That's what I think whoever came here was after."

"It's plausible, Clark, but it's just a guess," Henderson objected. "They could have been petty thieves after money."

"No," Lois disagreed, finally taking part in the conversation. She gestured to her display cabinet, with its doors and drawers standing open. "There are things in there which could be sold easily - jewellery and so on - and there's some cash I keep there to pay delivery people. It's all still there."

"Yeah, and the only things that have been taken, as far as we can see, are some computer disks," Clark added.

"Computer disks." Henderson was deep in thought now.

"Yes. What was on those disks, Lois?" Clark asked.

Lois hesitated, her competitive streak asserting itself and making her reluctant to reveal to her colleague details of her work. She caught the expression on Clark's face, however, and shrugged. "Most of them were blank - it was a new box. But one of them had copies of the notes I was making for my investigation into Superman."

Clark inwardly flinched at the thought of anything Lois might have found out about him falling into criminal hands, but was relieved that nothing relating either to the gun-running story or the election coverage had been stolen. He turned to Henderson. "My guess is that they were looking for Lois's evidence - but she, and it, were at my place this evening."

Henderson shrugged. "You could be right, Clark, but there's not a whole lot anyone can do about it now. I'll get someone over to dust for prints in the morning, but if this was a professional job, my bet is we won't find any."

Turning away from his companions, Clark slipped his glasses down

discreetly and focused on Lois's display cabinet; he frowned as he realised that Henderson was right and that no prints were visible. Another thought occurring to him suddenly, he moved into the kitchen and prowled about restlessly.

"What's up, Clark?" Lois demanded, following him. "Look, maybe I should make some coffee - "

"Don't touch anything!" Clark rapped out, moving swiftly to take her by the shoulders and steer her back towards the sitting-room. Both Lois and Henderson stared at him.

"Can I sit down?" Lois demanded sarcastically, angry at Clark's behaviour. Clark surreptitiously X-rayed Lois's sofa before nodding.

"What's all this about?" Henderson demanded, a fraction of a second before Lois.

"My guess is this," Clark began to explain. "This morning's attempt on Lois's life was meant to look like an accident. I don't think that whoever's behind this wants it to look like murder. So if they tried again, it would be some other kind of 'accident' - like a runaway truck - " here, he glanced at Henderson, intending to remind the man of the death of Lois's source " - or maybe faulty wiring in a domestic appliance." He turned to Lois. "I don't think you should use anything here until it's all been checked out."

When he had gone into the kitchen, Clark had initially thought of using his super-powers to check the various appliances for safety, but he had quickly rejected that idea for a number of reasons. There were too many items which could have been booby-trapped, including equipment in Lois's bathroom or bedroom; he couldn't check them all quickly enough without causing suspicion. Secondly, while a severe electric shock or explosion would have no effect on him, he could think of no simple means of explaining away his immunity. And probably most important was the fact that Clark wanted to prove to Henderson that Lois's life was in danger.

"I don't know why I'm going along with this, Clark, but OK. I'll get a team in tomorrow to check the place over," Henderson agreed. "In the meantime, Lois, do you have somewhere you can stay tonight?"

Clark answered for her. "She'll be at my place." Henderson nodded, and left after promising to be in touch.

Lois glared at Clark. "How dare you just take over and make decisions for me like that!"

Clark spread his arms wide in exasperation. "If you have a problem, Lois, you can call a cab and just go over to Perry's place. But you know, you could have called Perry for help in the first place. I seem to remember it was *me* you called," he finished in a slightly sarcastic tone.

"Sure - as a friend!" Lois retorted. "I could just as easily have called Jimmy - but you live nearer!"

"Jimmy has a bike," Clark observed quietly, watching her with an

intent expression. "He can get about quickly enough. You called *me*, Lois."

"Stop trying to read something into it!" she yelled at him. "I work with you, that's all."

"Yeah, and you always kiss your work colleagues the way you kissed me," he replied in an irritatingly calm tone. "Look, Lois," he added more gently, "I promise you that you can have my bed and I will sleep on the couch. You'll be perfectly safe from me. I do think that there could be something between us - but now isn't the time to find out what it might be."

A little reassured, but still angry at what she saw as Clark's attempts to make decisions for her, Lois accompanied him out of her apartment.

Awakened in the morning by the smell of coffee, Lois opened her eyes, stretched and looked around with interest at the unfamiliar surroundings. The previous night there had been little time to pay much attention to the layout of Clark's bedroom; he had found her a spare toothbrush and towel, offered her one of his T-shirts to sleep in and made her a hot, milky drink before collecting a pillow and blanket for himself. True to his word, he had kept his distance from her physically; Lois was surprised to find that this had disappointed her: she would have liked a goodnight kiss, she thought, even a platonic one... Exhausted after the day's events, she had quickly fallen asleep.

Hearing the telephone ring, she jumped out of bed and shut herself in the bathroom as she heard Clark answer it. A damp towel on the rail indicated that he had already showered; she made use of the shower herself before brushing her teeth and combing her hair in front of the mirror. As she did so, she glanced around at the various men's cosmetic products arrayed on the shelf: a well-known brand of shampoo and deodorant, hair gel, an expensive men's cologne which Lois recognised: it had a scent she liked, and she now remembered that Clark had been wearing it on a number of occasions over the past week or so. She frowned - where was his razor? No shaving foam, so presumably he used an electric shaver - but there was no power point in the bathroom, and no sign of a razor anywhere. Strange... She ceased her musing and hurried back into the bedroom as she heard Clark call her name.

She grimaced as she dressed in the previous day's clothes. "At least he could have let me pack something!" she muttered as she buttoned her blouse. Ready at last, she walked though to the kitchen where, to her amazement, Clark had set the table for breakfast. As well as the coffee, there were glasses of orange juice, croissants, and some pancakes with maple syrup.

Seeing her surprise, Clark grinned. "Croissants from a little French bakery I know..." in Paris, he thought with a smile, "and these are my mother's recipe," he added, gesturing at the pancakes. "She taught me when I was still very small, and I've never forgotten."

"Do you eat like this every morning?" Lois asked in disbelief as she sat at the table.

Clark shook his head. "Only if I have guests." He reached for the coffee-jug and poured for both of them, making casual conversation as they ate. Only when Lois had refused another pancake did he become serious. "Lois, Henderson called just before you got up. He confirmed that there were no fingerprints, but he also said the investigators discovered your bedside lamp was rigged to electrocute whoever switched it on."

Lois gasped; although she had believed Clark was right about the burglars looking for her investigation files, she had thought his other suggestion was an over-reaction. "They really were out to kill me! Or would it have...?" She trailed off, looking at Clark for more information.

He nodded. "It wouldn't have just given you a shock - it was rigged to give off so much power that it would kill a human being. But Henderson said it was very cleverly done - it would have looked like a tragic accident, just worn wiring which had unfortunately come into contact with something wet... there was a glass on the floor beside the wire, which just looked like it had been knocked over. A very clever way to set up an 'accident'."

"Someone really does want me dead," Lois whispered.

"That's not going to happen - I will not let that happen," Clark stated firmly, his eyes holding Lois's. "We need to find who's behind this, and fast, before they have time to pull any other stunts."

"Yeah, I guess," Lois agreed. "It just seems like we've hit a brick wall, Clark - Brentford's dead and I can't think who else would be so concerned about it now."

"Who else was involved?" Clark asked. "There were other names in your files..."

"No-one of any real importance, and I checked yesterday afternoon. A lot of them are in prison, one's dead, another seems to have gone straight - he runs a diner in the lower South Side now." She paused. "I could talk to him."

"*We* could talk to him," Clark said with heavy emphasis. Lois glared at him. He sighed, and faced her with a serious expression. "Lois, twice yesterday someone tried to kill you. I'd say that makes it pretty definite whoever it is will try again. That means you go nowhere on your own at the moment - either I'm with you, or you have a police escort."

Lois attempted to stare him down, but without success. "Is it all right if I go to the bathroom on my own?" she demanded sarcastically.

Clark gestured in the direction of his bathroom. "Be my guest."

Lois glared. "I don't need it now. What I do need are some clean clothes - I feel grubby and I won't go into work like this."

"Fine - we'll stop by your apartment. The police should have finished

there by now." Clark stood and reached for his jacket, and led the way out of his apartment. On the way, he tried to make peace with Lois: he understood that some of her anger was based on fear, which was perfectly natural in the circumstances, but he was also aware, from things Perry White had told him, that Lois tended to resent what she saw as attempts to control her life or tell her what to do. And, he thought ruefully, he had probably stepped over the line in that respect a couple of times in the last twenty-four hours. It was partly because he was invulnerable, he knew; nothing except Kryptonite could hurt him, but he knew how easily a human life could be snuffed out. And he did not want that to happen to Lois Lane.

Lois, for her part, was reflecting on the fact that, once again, her life was under threat. Before she had gone to the Congo, she had escaped death narrowly a couple of times, and had not been particularly affected by the experience. It seemed different now, and she was wondering whether she really was losing her 'edge'... was it because she was older and perhaps less reckless as a result, or had her experience in Africa, living among people to whom life was valued very highly, changed her in ways she had not realised? Whatever the cause, she found herself wanting very much to escape this present threat. She stole a glance at Clark as they neared her building; he was apologising again for what he described as his 'high-handed behaviour' at his apartment, and assuring her that he had only said it because he didn't want her to get hurt. She supposed that he was right; she would be in more danger alone than with company, and it was nice of him to be so concerned. She paused and touched his arm lightly.

"Clark, I appreciate your concern. Just... next time, try not to sound like some sort of macho male super-hero, right?"

Clark grinned. "Sure - I guess I should have remembered your aversion to super-heroes!"

As they arrived at the Planet a little later, Lois and Clark were greeted by an excited Jimmy. "I kept digging around like you said, you know, about Nigel St John..."

"You found something?" Lois demanded.

"Sure, if you'll let me tell you... He used to be in the British Secret Service!"

Clark whistled. "How on earth did you manage to find that out? You wouldn't get that from any public records!"

"No, well, I had to do a bit more hacking, kind of illegal stuff, you know," Jimmy replied, evidently proud of his work.

"Hmmm, well, just make sure it's not traced back to you," Clark replied. "I wouldn't want to see you in trouble with the law - I don't think Perry could defend this under the Constitution." He grinned, then added, "Nice work, Jimmy."

Making their way to Lois's desk, Lois stared at Clark. "Why on earth is Luthor employing an ex-secret service man?"

"Beats me," Clark replied. "If he was some sort of bodyguard, I'd understand it - but St John is hardly a bodyguard if Luthor has him working with Leeson."

"Yeah - there's a lot more to this than we know right now," Lois mused. Then, struck by a thought, she added, "Secret Service... he'd know all about breaking and entering, and probably about setting booby-traps too, I guess?"

Clark stilled; it was very plausible. "Nice work, Lois - I see why you got all those awards. You really know how to fit things together."

"Yeah, well, now we have to prove it," she said. "I think we should contact St John and call his bluff."

Clark stared at her. "What do you mean, call his bluff?"

"I can tell him I have evidence linking him to the gun-running business, and that I know he was in my apartment last night. We can get him to meet us, and tape him."

"You're crazy!" Clark exclaimed. "This is a highly dangerous man - you tell him anything of the sort and he'll forget all about making it look like an accident. No, I think we should keep well away from him for the time being, and just keep digging. Anyway, I still want to know what Luthor's position is in all this."

"You think Luthor might be involved in the gun-running?" Lois asked.

"I don't know," Clark said thoughtfully. "It's highly possible that St John was on his own in that operation... but given that he'd been working for Luthor about four years at that stage, I don't think so."

"OK, OK, I'll stay away from St John - for now," Lois agreed. "But I want to talk to that guy I mentioned, the one who's running a diner?"

"Sure - we'll go over there at lunchtime if you like," Clark offered. He could read Lois's body-language; it was obvious that she was itching to get moving on the investigation. An idea came to him, and he excused himself to deal with his post. Once it was clear that Lois was engrossed in checking her email, he took a clean piece of paper, and, disguising his handwriting, wrote on it at super-speed. He then folded it, slipped it into an envelope, wrote Lois's name on the front, and strolled downstairs to the Planet's front desk. Pretending to scan the headlines on the newspapers displayed there, he surreptitiously slipped the envelope in front of the security guard.

That ought to distract her for a while, he thought in amusement.

Ten minutes later, as Clark was busily typing at his desk, he saw the guard approach Lois. "Letter for you, Ms Lane."

Lois glanced at the envelope: hand delivered, the writing was

unfamiliar. She tore it open and withdrew the sheet of paper inside, then stared as its origin became clear to her.

"Ms Lane, I understand that you want to interview me. If you meet me at Clark Kent's apartment at 10 am this morning, I will try to answer your questions."

It was unsigned, but the 'S' symbol from Superman's costume was sketched at the bottom.

"Clark, did you know about this?" Lois demanded, showing him the note.

He shrugged. "I told him he could use my apartment to meet you if he wanted - it's less public than anywhere else."

"It's 9.45 now!" Lois exclaimed.

"Then we'd better get over there," Clark replied. "Come on, we'll get a cab."

"This is **my** interview, Clark! I know he's a friend of yours, but..."

"Don't worry," Clark assured her, "it will be just you and Superman." He smothered a smile as he spoke. "I just want to see you get over there safely - and I know you'll be safe with Superman around, so I don't need to stay."

Grabbing her notebook and tape-recorder, Lois followed him, and in the taxi she did her best to gather together her thoughts and compose a series of - she hoped - probing questions. At his apartment, Clark simply showed Lois where to find coffee, cups and so on, then excused himself, assuring her that he would return in time to accompany her to Joe's Diner later.

Left alone, Lois began to prowl around the living-room, inspecting the various mementoes and photographs which stood on the shelves of Clark's bookcase and on other convenient places around the room. The older photographs revealed a middle-aged couple with a very young Clark; later photos depicted an older version of the boy, either alone or with a small number of other teenagers. The college graduation photograph was particularly poignant when Lois compared it with her own: no proud parents standing with Clark as he clutched his scroll. What must it have been like growing up without a family, she wondered with a rush of sympathy for her colleague. Although Lois's own family life had not been the happiest, she still knew that she wouldn't trade it for Clark's experience.

A loud 'swoosh' distracted her, and she whirled around to see Superman striding through the kitchen area towards her. Suddenly Lois felt herself in danger of losing her composure as she remembered the circumstances of her previous meeting with the Superhero - and just what he had done before leaving her. < Well, he won't get the chance this time! > she insisted furiously, while a fraction of her brain protested that his kiss hadn't been entirely objectionable...

Clark, who had deliberately taken his time returning as Superman, also found himself struggling to maintain his normal impersonal

manner. His personal feelings about Lois aside, he was aware from her expression that she had not forgotten his behaviour on the occasion of their last meeting, and he resolved to give her no opportunity to find fault with his attitude this time.

Lois's confused thoughts were interrupted by Superman coughing slightly. "Ahem... Ms Lane?"

"Oh - Superman... hello," Lois replied, attempting to pull herself together. < For God's sake, you're a professional journalist - act like one!> she told herself angrily.

"Good morning," Superman replied. "Ah - would you like to sit down?" He gestured towards the sofa. Lois hesitated, then seated herself and arranged her tape recorder on the coffee table, pen and pad poised ready to take notes. Superman, his cape swishing behind him, moved to the easy chair and sat.

Determined to take control of the situation, Lois began, "So, Superman... I understand from the few interviews you've given previously that you are from another planet: could you tell me just how you got here, and when that was?"

< Trust Lois Lane> Clark thought. No-one else had thought to ask him the 'when' before; the assumption had generally been made that it had been around about the time of his first appearance as Superman. He attempted to divert her away from that part of the question by explaining about the disaster which had struck Krypton and the attempt by his parents, Kryptonian scientists, to save their son if not themselves. Lois was nodding as she took notes, although the tape recorder was also in operation. After a moment or two, she fixed his eyes with a straight stare as she added, "And when exactly did you say that was?"

"A... few years ago," Clark replied vaguely. OK, twenty-nine, he told himself, but she can't know that! "But I didn't have these super-powers at first - they seem to be something to do with the Earth's yellow sun, and it took some time before they became evident."

Lois was not happy with his imprecise reply, but made a note to herself to return to it later. She decided to pursue the issue of Superman's powers, and observed that, while she had read about, and to some extent seen, what he could do, she would like him to explain exactly what powers he had. Clark was quite happy with this as a subject for discussion, and spent some time talking about what he could do, and to an extent demonstrating his abilities.

"So... you can burn things by looking at them, if you concentrate," Lois commented. "Well, I burn things when I don't concentrate, so maybe I have one over on you there..."

In the study of Lex Luthor's penthouse apartment, Luthor was pacing the floor in an impatient manner, one which his assistant, Nigel, was aware did not bode well.

"So what went wrong this time, Nigel?" Luthor rapped.

"As far as my sources in the police are able to ascertain, sir, Ms Lane's colleague, a Mr Clark Kent, persuaded Detective Inspector Henderson to search Ms Lane's apartment for anything which might have been tampered with," St John replied cautiously. "The disks which I found contained nothing more than some notes on Superman - nothing, unfortunately, of which we were not already aware."

"Kent!" Luthor snapped. "I've had trouble from him before - he seems determined to believe that I have an sordid side as well as being a legitimate businessman and Metropolis's greatest philanthropist."

"Well, you do, sir, don't you," Nigel mused aloud.

"Of course I do, but I have no intention of allowing Lois Lane - or her interfering colleague - to find that out," Luthor replied, a faint smile curling at his lips as he took a puff of his cigar. "I think it would be best if both Lane and Kent were eliminated - and since Mr Kent appears to have realised that Ms Lane's life is in danger, I don't think we need to make it look like an accident this time, Nigel."

"Certainly, sir - I'll ensure that it's done, and that Ms Lane's files are also tracked down and destroyed." St John agreed smoothly. "Now, I believe that your masseuse is waiting for you in the other room..."

"Yes, indeed, Nigel," Luthor replied, crossing the room swiftly. "I think some distraction would be in order for tomorrow - it *is* the shooting season in Scotland, is it not?"

"Indeed," Nigel concurred. "Grouse? I will instruct the pilot to be ready to leave for Edinburgh later this evening."

Lois had been asking Superman questions for over an hour, but yet she felt that she was nowhere nearer to digging underneath the surface of his public profile. Any attempts at personal questions: where did he live, where did he go when he wasn't flying around saving people, what was his name; all were politely but firmly answered with a "Sorry, I can't answer that." Gritting her teeth, she moved to the other main topic which she had wanted to explore: Superman's motivation.

"Superman, I get the impression that so many people, including the police and the government, get caught up in being grateful for the things you do, and so they have never really stopped to ask *why* you do them," she prompted.

Superman shrugged slightly. "That's not difficult - I want to help," he replied. "I have all of these powers, which you know about, and it seems irresponsible to me not to use them to make some sort of a difference. I don't really see the point in having them otherwise."

"OK, so because you're strong and invulnerable, you can pull people out of a burning building or stop a volcano erupting. No-one could deny that these are worthwhile things, or deny you credit for doing them. But what about when you apprehend alleged criminals? What about

their rights?"

"You mean that I don't read them their rights, or that I take away their freedom of movement by flying them to the nearest police station?" Clark enquired. "I've heard that sort of accusation before, and I can assure you that if I am ever informed by the Chief of Police, or the government, that what I am doing is wrong, or somehow in conflict with anyone's constitutional rights, I will be happy to discuss some other means of assisting the police. I don't see fighting crime as my primary responsibility anyway - that's the job of the police. I just want to ensure that people don't get hurt as a result, and if that means disarming a suspect and detaining him until the police arrive, then I will do that." He directed his gaze at Lois as he spoke, his tone indicating that he took his responsibilities very seriously.

"All right, no-one has ever told you not to do what you do," Lois acknowledged. "But on the other hand, you are not employed by the city, or the government; you don't have a licence to arrest people; you have no authorisation to stop and search anyone, or prevent their free movement. Doesn't that make you little more than a vigilante?"

"You're suggesting that I'm taking the law into my own hands?" Clark asked incredulously. "Ms Lane, what about the passer-by who stops to help a fellow citizen in trouble? The motorist who stops her car to help someone involved in an accident? The neighbour who calls 911 when someone is in distress, or makes a citizen's arrest? Are all of these people vigilantes, or are you suggesting that no-one has any responsibility to their fellow human beings any more?"

"All right, some of what you say makes sense," Lois conceded, "but most people don't make citizen's arrests by wrapping burglars up in a lamp-post."

"True, but if there was some rope nearby wouldn't you use it in a similar situation?" Superman suggested. "I'm sure I've heard stories of the intrepid Lois Lane restraining criminals with their own weapons while waiting for the police," he added with a raised eyebrow.

"Well, whatever methods you use, what I'm concerned about is why you get involved in these things. After all, the city pays for police, and paramedics, and a fire service - and these people put their lives on the line day after day, for the good of the citizens of Metropolis. You... no-one even knows where you live, whether you pay taxes - why do you do it? And don't give me any of that stuff about wanting to help - you're not going to claim you're some sort of guardian angel, are you?" Lois challenged. "No-one does anything without wanting something in return. What does it for you - the thought of being a hero, with everyone in America looking up to you?"

Clark was astounded; he had not expected this sort of hostility from Lois, and he wasn't sure how to respond. It wasn't the first time that his motives had been called into question, although one of those earlier occasions had involved a demented military officer who had been convinced that Superman was simply the advance guard for an army of Kryptonian invaders. He hesitated before replying; as Superman, he wasn't really concerned about one hostile article, always assuming

that Perry White agreed to run something along the lines Lois appeared to be suggesting. But as Clark, he realised that he didn't want Lois to be hostile to Superman. He attempted to explain.

"Ms Lane - Lois - I'm not sure what I can say to convince you... and I appreciate that my behaviour when we first met can't have helped. But I do assure you that the thought of gratitude or admiration from the people around me has nothing to do with *why* I do the things I do. I help simply because I can."

"Yeah, and you do it in *such* an understated way, don't you?" Lois challenged sarcastically. "I mean, you fly around in this outfit - all those primary colours, it's not exactly designed to escape attention. You're trying to tell me that you actually *care* about what happens to people - well, I'm just not sure that I can believe that. It doesn't cost you anything to do what you do - you're invulnerable, whereas a fire officer who goes into a burning building to rescue someone does so at risk to his or her own life. I don't believe - "

She trailed off as Superman jumped to his feet. He loomed over her in a vaguely threatening manner before backing away, moving towards the kitchen. Turning back, he said harshly, "I can see that you're determined to stick with your preconceived views about me, Ms Lane. I don't believe that's a very professional thing for a journalist to do, but that's your job and I don't want to interfere. I think it's best if I leave now."

Struck by his words into realising that she had been guilty of unprofessional and judgmental behaviour, Lois tried to call him back, but he was striding purposefully towards the door leading to Clark's balcony. Just as he had opened the door, Superman turned back to Lois and spoke firmly but marginally more warmly. "By the way, Ms Lane, Clark told me about the attempts on your life. I'll be looking out, but if you get into any trouble, just call." Before Lois could reply, he had disappeared.

Clark flew straight upwards, then, high above the city, set his course out towards the Atlantic. He knew that he should return to his apartment so that Lois wasn't left alone, but he was aware that he needed some time to calm down after the unpleasant scene in his living-room. Just why was Lois so hostile to Superman? In some ways, he reflected, it wasn't really surprising: from what he had been told about her, and from his study of her writing, it was clear that Lois Lane had always had a suspicious nature. Jimmy had once told Clark that, as far as Lois was concerned, 'everyone has an angle' - Jimmy had even suggested, only half-joking, that if Lois had been around in about 30 AD she would have been at the head of those trying to prove Jesus had faked his resurrection from the dead. He sighed; the previous evening he had thought that he and Lois were at the beginning of what could be a very beautiful relationship - but with her attitude to Superman, how far could it go?

Lois couldn't understand what had got into her; although she had on previous occasions interviewed people about whom she was sceptical, she had usually managed to maintain her sense of perspective. However, she had been completely rude and unprofessional towards Superman, and although she still believed that he had not answered

her questions adequately, she knew that she had largely been at fault herself for the failure of the interview.

She heard Clark call to her from outside the apartment's front door, and quickly tried to regain her composure as she tidied her notes and put them, with the tape recorder, in her briefcase. Schooling her features and determined not to give anything away about the abortive interview, she turned to face her colleague as he entered; she noticed that his expression was shuttered, as if he was upset about something.

"Is something wrong, Clark?" she asked, moving towards him.

Annoyed with himself for giving anything away, Clark shook his head. "Nothing. Let's get over to that diner and see if we can make any headway on that investigation." He hustled her out of the apartment and flagged down a taxi.

The journey was accomplished mostly in silence; Lois was occupied in reliving her interview and trying to understand why she had behaved as she had, while Clark was wondering whether he had better give up on any thought of a relationship with Lois while she was so hostile to him as Superman. At the diner, however, both were recalled to their purpose in being there and they had a brief discussion of tactics before entering. They ordered lunch; Lois raised an eyebrow at Clark's choice of hot dogs with everything on, which was in some contrast to her low-fat cheese sandwich on rye. When the food arrived, Lois asked whether Joe Santiago was around, explaining that she had known him some years before.

Some minutes later, the owner appeared from the region of the kitchen and approached the table, appearing to blanch when he saw Lois. Clark was swift to get to his feet and encourage the man over to their table.

"Look, lady, I don't want no trouble," the owner protested. "I went straight after I got out of jail a year ago..."

"We know that," Lois assured him. "We only want some information - and from your reaction, I guess you know what I'm looking for."

"Sure - I knew you were sniffing around Brentford four years ago, and that you went to the Congo to track down the arms smuggling stuff," Joe replied in a low voice. "But Brentford's dead - and I thought you were too."

"Oh - so the street gossip hasn't reached you then?" Clark challenged. Seeing Joe's blank expression, he elaborated. "Word got around that Lois was back, and yesterday there were two attempts on her life. One was set up with help from a small-time criminal named Mitch - mean anything to you?"

Joe shrugged. "I know Mitch - he eats in here sometimes." Lois and Clark exchanged glances - it was clear that this man didn't even know the snitch was dead.

"What I'm interested in is what was going on four years ago," Lois said firmly. "I know you did some running around for Brentford - he didn't like doing his own dirty work. But it looks to me that

Brentford wasn't the only one involved then - what I want to know is who was involved then and would want me out of the way now?"

Joe hesitated; Clark took that as his cue to produce his wallet. Laying three ten-dollar bills carefully on the table, he fixed the man with a hard stare. "What do you know?"

Joe barely glanced at the cash as he muttered his reply. "Look, you guys, I don't want your money. I'm not about to become no newspaper snitch." He took a deep breath, and glanced around before continuing. "Yeah, there was someone else involved then -bigger than Brentford. Brentford was scared of him too, and a couple of us figured that maybe Brentford's death was no accident. But you know how it is - we don't ask questions."

"Who?" Lois demanded eagerly.

Joe shook his head. "Like I said, we don't ask questions - that was one question you definitely didn't want to ask." He stood up. "Don't come here again."

Outside, walking to the nearest main street to flag down a cab, Lois and Clark attempted to digest what they had heard. "So we weren't wrong to think that Brentford might have been killed," Lois mused aloud.

"No," Clark agreed. "I wonder who this Mr Big is - obviously someone very important, or threatening, if Brentford was scared of him."

"Yeah," Lois agreed. They stopped simultaneously and stared at each other.

"Brentford was on Luthor's yacht..."

"St John works for Luthor and probably turned over my apartment..."

"That means Luthor may have been ultimately behind the gun-running and is probably the one who wants you dead, Lois," Clark finished.

"Yeah - but how the hell do we prove it? Other than letting him be caught in the act," Lois added dryly.

"Luthor? No chance - he'd never get his own hands dirty," Clark replied sardonically.

"Maybe we should contact him, ask for another interview - say we want to ask him about his business dealings with Brentford," Lois suggested.

Clark hesitated. It was one possible way of shocking Luthor into giving something away, although he personally doubted that it would be very successful. On his own, he might just have tried it, but he was concerned for Lois's personal safety. "No - I think it's too risky," he concluded at last, and was rewarded with an angry glare from his partner. Annoyed, given that he was only thinking of her safety, he was stung into replying, "You might not care if you end up dead, but try thinking of Perry and Jimmy for a change. They were

upset enough the last time they thought you'd been killed."

Lois stopped dead and turned to face Clark with her hands on her hips. "Just what is eating you, Clark Kent? You've been in a bad mood since before lunch! Don't think you can take your frustrations out on me!"

About to deny there was anything wrong, Clark changed his mind; it would do no harm to give Ms Lane a piece of his mind, and he could easily explain the source of his information. "All right, Ms Kerth-award winning reporter, I'll tell you what's up with me," he began in a tight, angry tone. "I saw Superman after you'd interviewed him, and he told me you'd questioned his integrity and practically accused him of lying. I set up that interview as a favour to you, and I'm not very happy about you abusing my trust in order to insult a friend of mine."

Lois glared at Clark; the fact that she knew he was right was certainly not going to prevent her being annoyed at his daring to challenge her. "So - Superman's a friend of yours, is he? Do you always defend him like that? And if so, just where does that leave your integrity and professionalism as a journalist?"

Furious, Clark inhaled sharply before allowing himself to speak. Forcing himself to use a calmer tone of voice, he replied, "If you think that my integrity is in question here, Lois, then perhaps you should work on your own. I'm sure you wouldn't want to be teamed up with someone you believe is unprofessional."

Lois was shocked; she had spoken in anger and had not really meant what she had said. And, although she had in the past always preferred to work alone, the realisation that Clark wanted to end their temporary partnership stunned her; she realised that she didn't want to stop working with him. Clark was no longer looking at her, but, she recognised, he was trying to hail a taxi. She reached out and touched his arm.

"Clark, I'm sorry - I didn't mean what I said about you." Her voice was quiet, apologetic, her eyes unconsciously pleading as he turned back to face her.

"I accept your apology," he replied after a brief pause. "But, you know, it's well known that people often only say what they really think when they're angry... when the polite veneer of society drops off," he added. "If you really do believe that my journalistic integrity is in doubt, it might be better if we stopped working together."

"Do you want to split up?" Lois asked.

Clark heaved a sigh. "Not really," he admitted. "We're making progress on both stories - and it's looking like they might be linked. Neither of us could have got this far on our own... we make a good team. But it won't work if we can't trust each other."

"I do trust you, Clark," Lois insisted. "Look - I was angry, I didn't know Superman had spoken to you, and to be honest, I'm angry with myself over that interview. I'm not sorry I challenged him, but I could have been more tactful," she admitted.

Clark gave her a wry, forced smile. "I guess we all make mistakes," he conceded, although he was still annoyed about her questions to him as Superman and her suggestion that he was unprofessional as a journalist. However, he acknowledged, Lois could not be expected to understand why he should be unhappy about her attitude to Superman, and she had apologised for questioning his integrity. It was best to forget it, he thought; and anyway, he didn't want to lose Lois as a partner either. And they had a lot of work to do... Spotting a taxi with its 'For Hire' sign lit, he flagged it down and they travelled back to the Planet in virtual silence.

Lois tried to avoid looking at Clark during the twenty-minute journey. She was wrestling with the uncomfortable knowledge that he was right about her behaviour during her interview with Superman - but right only up to a point, she believed. There was absolutely no reason why she should not express curiosity, even scepticism, about the man's motives, and Clark had absolutely no right to criticise her for that. But she had gone too far with her questioning, virtually accusing the Super-hero of being a vain-glorious egomaniac. *That* was unprofessional, and if her behaviour became common knowledge, then anything she later wrote about Superman would be suspect as a result. So much for a Kerth or Pulitzer award-winning article on the man behind the costume!

And now Clark clearly disapproved of her. Stealing a sidelong glance at him as he sat next to her, Lois noted the grim set of his chin, his expression suggesting that he was deep in thought. Where was the charming, considerate companion of yesterday, who had laughed, joked and talked freely with her? Was it really only yesterday that they had shared a passionate kiss outside her apartment building? It had been a long time since Lois had been kissed by a man; even longer since she had been so profoundly affected by a kiss. But from Clark Kent's manner now, it was clear that kissing Lois Lane again was the furthest thing from his mind.

Lois would have been amazed if she could have read Clark's thoughts, however, since he was in fact remembering, and re-living, their kiss. The previous evening, he had thought that all of his dreams were about to come true. Never had he imagined that he would meet a woman as special as Lois Lane. She was funny, intelligent, warm, loyal - or so he had thought - and fantastically responsive. It had taken all of his self-control not to accompany her up to her apartment, to continue kissing and touching her - and whatever else she might have permitted. Not that they would have done much of that, of course, he knew, since Lois had in fact returned to find the evidence of the intruder. When he had taken her home to his apartment, despite his assurances that she would be safe with him, it had again taken all of his reserves of control - learnt in a series of tough lessons as he was growing up and discovering all of the possibilities of his powers - to allow her to go to bed alone, without even a goodnight embrace. Never, even in all his years with Lana, had he experienced such strong feelings of attraction and desire towards a woman, and it was making him rethink very seriously the decision he had made after his relationship with Lana had ended, about not becoming involved in a relationship again.

But, he reflected, how could he contemplate a relationship with Lois now? That she was suspicious of Superman was bad enough; it made it seriously difficult to contemplate telling her of his dual identity, and the alternative - continuing to deceive her - seemed not only

counter-productive but also highly impractical. How on earth would he be able to explain his continual disappearances? It was going to be difficult enough with Lois as his partner at work, but if they were also dating, his leaving to be Superman would become impossible to explain away.

In a way, he could understand Lois's attitude to Superman. She was an award-winning investigative journalist, after all; it was her job - no, her nature - to question things other people would take for granted. And the existence of a mysterious being performing feats of Super-ability and strength would naturally arouse her suspicion, not only about this person's origins but also about his motives. That was understandable, and he shouldn't have been especially surprised at that line of questioning. It was certainly in keeping with the case she had made at the Planet staff meeting when she had bid for the right to do the investigation in the first place. But he had been taken off guard by the manner in which she had asked the questions. He supposed he had allowed himself to be lulled by the fact that he, as Clark, had seemed to slip under Lois's famous guard with relative ease. Despite what he had heard about her from colleagues, she had accepted his overtures of friendship and had given him her trust within a couple of weeks of their meeting.

But there had been no reason to suspect that she would show Superman the same degree of trust, Clark realised in retrospect. He should have expected that, and as a result he should have been able to take control of the interview. After all, he was an award-winning journalist himself, and as Superman he was certainly used to fielding awkward questions.

No, he couldn't really attach too much blame to Lois for the conduct of the interview, although her feelings about Superman made the prospect of a closer relationship difficult. It was her behaviour towards him, Clark, which both angered and saddened him. He had thought that she had come to trust him; yet she had accused him of unprofessionalism and made it clear that she suspected his motives in criticising her. Even if they were able to continue working as partners, could there be any chance of a deeper relationship now? Even if, as she had protested, she had spoken out of anger and hadn't really meant what she had said, he couldn't believe that she didn't suppose that she had grounds for her impulsive words. People rarely make accusations they know to be false, he considered.

So, no matter how attracted he felt to Lois, no matter how memories of the previous evening intruded upon his thoughts and made him want to be close to her again, he admitted to himself that a relationship between them would be a mistake. < You can't love where there is no trust > he pointed out to himself. < Lana didn't trust me to protect us and our privacy when I helped people, especially when I became Superman... that's why that relationship was doomed. And if Lois can't trust me... > He stared unseeingly out of the window as the taxi made its way through the busy city streets, desperately trying to convince himself that Lois was a complication he could do without.

The atmosphere was strained between Clark and Lois for the remainder of the day: while both wanted to put their argument behind them, neither knew how to regain their previous easy friendship, or even

whether that would be possible. It was simpler just to get on with their job of investigating Nigel St John's links with the Mayor, Lex Luthor and possible gun-running. It proved not to be an easy task: it seemed that one of St John's greatest talents was the ability to keep a low profile. None of the reporters' contacts on the street knew much about him, or were aware of his connections to Luthor. What did become evident was that St John was considered a dangerous man to cross, and one of Lois's old contacts even suggested that a couple of recent shootings of known criminals might be attributable to St John: one man found dead in a deserted warehouse, another whose body had been dragged out of Hobb's Bay with a bullet through its chest. In both cases, the weapons had also been abandoned, but no prints or any other identifying marks had been found on them.

Later, Clark approached Lois's desk, his expression animated. "I've just been talking to a good contact of mine who works in the Mayor's private office at City Hall - I asked him why an employee of Lex Luthor is on Leeson's campaign team. And get this," he added, "he had no idea St John works for Luthor. According to him, Leeson just tells everyone he's a political advisor. And this too - St John has been hanging around Leeson since long before the election, though no-one has any idea exactly what he was 'advising' her about - they thought he might be a boyfriend or something." Clark spread his hands. "Somehow, I don't think so. But this is getting even more intriguing, don't you think?"

"You bet it is," Lois agreed. "If Leeson's staff don't know who St John is... And do you know what I found out?" Lois filled Clark in on the results of her activities.

"So who are these two guys?" Clark asked. "You have names?"

Lois checked her pad, and read out, "Raoul Garcia and Don Parker."

"Any connections?"

"Not as far as my source was aware. Which isn't to say there couldn't be...."

"But if St John might have killed them, we need to find out why," Clark continued firmly. "I'll get Jack onto it - we need their rap-sheets, known associates, any possible links between them and St John, and if possible what they were doing in the day or so before they were murdered."

"Sure," Lois agreed. Looking thoughtful suddenly, she added, "You know, Parker's body was found in the river by LexHarbour. Could be another connection...?"

"Could be, but not necessarily," Clark mused. "After all, the harbour's not open for business yet - could just have been a convenient place for a meeting with no witnesses?"

Lois shook her head. "There are security guards - surely they would stop anyone with no business there? Whereas Lex Luthor's personal assistant...?"

Clark shrugged. "Maybe. We can check it out - there must be records of visitors."

Lois stood up. "I'm going over there." She picked up her bag and coat, and walked past Clark, who swiftly turned around and caught her arm in a light but restraining grip.

"Just hold on a moment, Lois - you're not going anywhere on your own as long as your life's at risk!" he reminded her, ignoring the angry glance she shot him. "I'm coming with you."

On the point of walking out of the newsroom with Lois, Clark's attention was distracted by the TV screens in the corner, on which a news anchor was talking about a breaking story involving an explosion in a high-rise development in downtown Chicago. Dozens of people, it seemed, were trapped, including a number of children. He knew he would have to go.

He stopped walking and turned to Lois. "I... uh, I can't go with you after all, there's something I've just remembered - I need to be someplace else." He paused, itching to escape from the Planet building so that he could get to Chicago, but at the same time concerned for his partner's safety. Glancing quickly around the newsroom in search of inspiration, his eye fell on Jimmy. Calling the young photographer over, he quickly explained the objective of the trip to LexHarbour and why it was important that Lois did not go alone.

Lois stood, feeling as if she was simply a spectator while other people arranged her life for her, and it infuriated her. As Clark finished his instructions to Jimmy, she bit out, "I am not a child, and I do not need a nursemaid!"

Clark hesitated, wondering whether to remind Lois yet again of her safety, but was again torn by hearing the additional details coming in from Chicago. Jimmy made the decision for him, clapping him on the shoulder and commenting, "CK, when you know Lois a bit better you'll understand that when she's in this kind of mood you just wanna get out of her way - OK? Now get going!"

Alone in her apartment that evening, Lois reflected that after all the fuss about organising it, the visit to LexHarbour had been a complete waste of time. The bored security guard had been disinclined to speak to reporters, and had only very grudgingly allowed Lois and Jimmy to see the relevant log. Neither St John nor Parker appeared on it. Jimmy had taken a look at the fencing around the harbour entrance, and commented that, while it was certainly possible that someone could get in without passing the security gate, it wouldn't be easy.

When she had finally left the Planet - by which time there had still been no sign of Clark - she had discovered that she had somehow acquired a police escort. Courtesy of Inspector Henderson, it seemed - via Clark, of course. An alarm button had been installed in her apartment, and a plain-clothes police officer apparently intended to remain outside her door all night. Lois gritted her teeth and vowed to tell Clark Kent precisely what she thought of him the next time she saw him. And she certainly wouldn't be kissing him again any time in the near future, she thought!

Although, given Clark's coolness since their lunchtime visit to Joe's Diner, that was unlikely in any case, she realised; he had been businesslike and polite where work was concerned, but there had been none of his usual warm smiles and gentle teasing. And she had missed it, which surprised her greatly.

What a day this had been, she reflected uncomfortably. Beginning with learning that she had narrowly escaped death yet again, things had gone steadily downhill since. Yes, she had behaved badly to Superman; the fact that she was pursuing a legitimate line of enquiry was no justification for some of the accusations she had made. And when Clark had quite reasonably pointed out that she had been unfair, she had accused him of being unprofessional. Lois was aware that one of the reasons... OK, she admitted, *the* reason - that she had felt awkward around Clark for the remainder of the day was that she knew that *she*, not he, had been the one guilty of unprofessional behaviour.

I need to apologise to him, Lois thought. No matter how I feel about his interference, this police guard, I... I was unfair to him.

She went to the telephone and dialled Clark's number, but all she got was the message on his answering machine. Replacing the receiver, she bit her lip and paced around her living-room, before clicking on the television in an attempt to distract herself. The first thing she saw was the red cape of Superman swooping down out of the dark night sky, and she almost changed the channel. Then she realised that it was a news broadcast and that the reporter was explaining that Superman had been spending several hours trying to rescue people who were trapped after a gas explosion had caused a high-rise apartment block to collapse in Chicago. It was in a low-income area, and a number of people had been at home at the time: young parents with their children, pensioners, sick and disabled people. Lois's hand went to her mouth as she realised how many people might have died, and for the first time she felt thankful that Superman existed. Without his help, she knew, many more people would have died, and the members of the emergency services, who were visible in the background, would have been at far greater risk working in the unstable building.

Sinking slowly to the couch, she continued to watch the broadcast, and sighed with relief about half an hour later as the reporter at the scene announced that the rescuers, with Superman's help, had finally brought out the last survivor. There was still work to be done, the reporter commented: the emergency services had to determine whether the building could be made safe or whether it would have to be demolished, and there would have to be an investigation into the cause of the explosion. Although Chicago was not Superman's home patch, he had volunteered his help in the investigation.

Switching off the television, Lois padded to the kitchen to make herself coffee. As she mechanically carried out the tasks involved, she again thought over her opinion of Superman. All right, unlike the other people at the scene he couldn't have been hurt or killed in such a dangerous situation; but he had still given up hours of his time to go there to help. Was it really fair to suggest that he didn't care?

As she sipped her coffee, Lois became aware of a tapping sound at her window. Alarmed, she considered calling the detective stationed

outside her apartment, but then she wondered instead how anyone could be outside the third-storey window of a modern apartment building; there weren't any wide ledges, nor was there an outside fire escape nearby. It was dark, and difficult to see, but she went cautiously to the window and looked out. A hand waved at her, attracting her attention.

She stepped back momentarily in shock, but then leaned forward again, peering out carefully. Something fluttered in the breeze, and she realised it was a cape; then the 'S' logo became visible. Why on earth was Superman visiting her? She opened the window and he drifted forward.

"May I come in, Ms Lane?" His voice was formal, his face grim, Lois thought.

She stepped back again, gesturing that he should enter. "Yes, if you want... what do you want, Superman?"

"Just a few minutes of your time." Now that he was here, Clark was beginning to regret the impulse which had sent him to Lois's apartment rather than home to his own. The encounter which had seemed to be such a good idea on his return from Chicago - to make Lois see the falsity of her accusations - now felt like a crazy idea. But he was here now... it wouldn't be very easy to make an excuse and leave.

He must be able to fly very quickly, Lois mused as it sank in that only minutes earlier she had seen him in Chicago, on a live TV broadcast. Feeling awkward because of her behaviour that morning, she gestured towards the kitchen. "I've just made coffee - would you like some?"

Superman came further into the living-room. "Yes, please, if it's not too much trouble."

"Uh... no trouble at all," Lois replied. He followed her into the kitchen and answered, almost mechanically, her enquiries as to milk and sugar in his coffee. As he accepted the mug from her, Lois became conscious of the film of dust on his suit and cape. "Uh... you just got back from Chicago, I guess? I... uh, I saw it on TV."

This is the opening you wanted, Clark told himself. He swallowed a mouthful of hot coffee and again reminded himself of the things she had accused him of that morning. Glancing towards Lois again, he noticed that she was studying his suit, and he became conscious of the dust and dirt.

"It's all right - I won't sit down and mark your furniture," he commented wryly.

"No - I mean, I wasn't thinking that at all," Lois insisted. "Please, sit down if you want - you must be tired after all you did, all those people you rescued... I mean, that is, if you get tired, I don't know if you do considering that you're invulnerable..." I'm babbling, she realised, forcing herself to stop. Why is she being friendly? Clark wondered, but didn't allow himself to dwell on the thought. Instead, he faced Lois with a hard stare, and spoke grimly. "Yes, I've been in Chicago, helping the emergency services to get dead and badly injured people out of that apartment building. I came to see you because I

thought that you might like to interview me about it for your story."

"My story?" Whatever Lois had expected, it wasn't this.

"Yes," Superman replied. "You asked about my powers, what kind of things I can do... you also asked *why* I help people. I think that what happened tonight might help you to understand."

"All right," Lois agreed. "Just let me get my tape recorder."

"You won't need it," Superman said confidently. "Just listen."

Lois perched on her sofa, looking up at him; he was now standing in the centre of her living-room, staring somewhere into the middle distance. There was an unreadable expression on his face; she couldn't interpret it, but it made her uncomfortable.

Superman began to speak, in a hard, cold voice. "That building exploded at just after 3 pm Chicago time. If it had been almost anywhere else in the city it wouldn't have been such a disaster because people would have been out at work, but since it was *that* block, homes for mainly families on welfare, most of the tenants were at home. Children, disabled people, young mothers... all trapped inside the remains of a building whose walls and ceilings had collapsed on top of them. There was water and smoke everywhere - the explosion had caused a number of fires. The water put some of them out, but not before some people had been burned." He paused, and paced a little. "The first thing I heard as I flew in were cries - children, babies, adults, all screaming in pain and calling for help. The emergency services had arrived, but they couldn't do much - the building was completely unstable and could have collapsed at any moment. And most of the people inside were trapped anyway, so it would be difficult to get them out without moving rubble and bricks and girders - which could have caused more collapses."

He turned to Lois. "Have you ever heard grown men and women screaming in pain and fear?" She shook her head dumbly; although she had covered disasters, she had not been present at anything as horrific as this incident. "It's an appalling sound. Paramedics and fire officers told me that they have nightmares about it."

He began to speak again, but he still seemed focused on a point some distance away, and Lois gradually became aware that he was no longer addressing her. He was reliving the events in his mind, and as she listened Lois could see why his expression, when he had arrived, had been so grim.

"I've helped at this kind of disaster before, and I know what needs to be done. I X-ray the building to see where people are trapped, and whether there's likely to be more collapses. I can see the best places to fix supports to prop up the rest of the building, and if I can free people while I'm putting supports in, I will. It's never easy - people who are trapped are hurt, scared, panicking sometimes... it's harder too when I have to make choices between who I take and who I leave for the moment, especially when it's just too dangerous to free someone.

"But it's just harder when there's so many kids, and helpless older people. They're just... more vulnerable." Lois took in Superman's

expression as he paused again; his face seemed drawn and pained as clearly, in his mind, he was back in Chicago. Suddenly he turned abruptly and faced Lois. "Ms Lane, do you know what it's like to hold the broken and bleeding dead body of a tiny baby - and have that child's mother come running up to you, hoping that her baby is still alive?"

Lois shook her head dumbly.

"I did, tonight," Superman continued. "I rescued that woman from the remains of her apartment - she was quite easy to get at, because she'd been near the front of the building. The wall had blown away and she'd been trapped, but she was protected from serious injury by a chair which fell on top of her. When I got her out, she begged me to go back for her kids - the baby and a two-year old; they'd been in the same room." He swallowed. "They were both dead. I tried not to let her see the two-year-old - he'd been crushed and he was barely recognisable as a human being. The baby, a little girl, had smothered with dust, and was hit by flying debris. I will never forget the look on that mother's face."

Again, as he stopped, Lois could see from his agonised, faraway expression that he was reliving the experience; reciting his memories aloud as if in an attempt to exorcise them.

Clark's eyes closed briefly and he began speaking again, more quietly this time. "That woman... she was younger than Jimmy - it was obvious she'd lost everything that was precious to her in the world. I handed her the baby, and she grabbed hold of my cape. I wanted to get back inside the building - there were other people who needed my help... but I couldn't just leave her. She... the tears were streaming down her face, and she begged... pleaded..." he trailed off, swallowed, then continued in a voice little more than a whisper. "She asked me to use my super-strength to end her life. She said... it would be easy, all I'd have to do was put my hand around her neck and squeeze - a couple of seconds was all it would take."

Lois stared at Superman in horror. She could not imagine being in that position, and it was obvious from his expression, the rigidity of his posture, that it had appalled and distressed him beyond belief. "But you... you couldn't do that!" she gasped.

He shook his head. "I would *never* knowingly harm anyone if it could be avoided, and I will not take a life, no matter what the circumstances. But... you didn't see her face, hear the pain in her voice..." He swallowed again, and as if in a trance walked to the other couch and sat down.

Now that he had begun to talk about his experiences in a way in which he had never before been able to do, Clark felt as if the floodgates had opened and the words, like torrents of water, tumbled out. He had come to Lois's apartment in anger, intending to tell her about the worst of what he had seen and done that evening, using shock tactics in an attempt to make her accept that he had been wrong about him. Yet now he no longer had such an aim in mind. He wondered just what it was about Lois Lane which made him feel, suddenly, that he could confide in her; that he could tell her things that he had never told another human being. Sitting across from her, he had the strangest sensation that, shocked as she was by what he was relating to her, she understood how he felt. This confrontation was worlds away from

her suspicion and lack of trust earlier in the day, he thought, amazed as he realised that he barely recognised the Lois who had interviewed him. Yet this was more like the Lois Lane he had shared the previous evening with... the warm, responsive and caring woman he had kissed.

His Super-activities that evening had not quite been his worst experience since donning the blue and red suit, but Clark thought that it was certainly close. Although he was unable to share in the kind of physical pain which the victims of the explosion had suffered, he could certainly empathise with their mental anguish. He knew only too well what it was like to lose the only family he had in the world; he understood the sense of being bereft, helpless in a world which suddenly no longer seemed to care. Clark, as Superman, had seen grief before, and it always pained him; the events of this evening, however, had somehow affected him in a deeper sense, although he wasn't sure why this should be so. Of course, digging children out of the rubble of collapsed buildings, and seeing the horrific injuries they had sustained, was always heart-wrenching, and Clark was well aware that the emergency personnel who were also present at such occasions shared his distress.

But there was more... something else he had not yet spoken about. Dragging the memory from where he had forcibly buried it, in the deepest recesses of his mind, he pictured the scene and began to describe it. "I went further into the building, where the basement had been. The whole place had collapsed like a house of cards... layer upon layer, walls, ceilings, steel girders, broken furniture, glass and shattered ceramic fittings. There were bodies lying around the place... I was able to detect pretty quickly whether any of them were alive - I can listen for a heartbeat, sense body temperature, focus in with my super-vision to see whether there's a pulse. Most of them were dead, but there was one who was alive, though he was unconscious. He was trapped under piles of concrete and debris, and when I X-rayed him it was obvious that his neck was broken. I had to be very careful moving around, because the entire building was very fragile and could have come crashing down on top of me at any moment - not that it would have hurt me, but there were people still trapped above me, who would have been killed. So I couldn't just lift the debris off this man and get him out. As luck would have it, the stack on top of him was actually acting as a crucial support for what was still standing."

Superman paused, remembering; as Lois listened, she realised that again he was barely aware of her presence. He continued, speaking in a jerky, distant voice. "The fire service had given me a radio link, and I was able to describe the situation to them; I also spoke to a doctor and described the man's condition. Because of my X-ray vision I was able to explain exactly where the break was, and list his other injuries... his pelvis was broken, he had head injuries and several broken ribs. It was a miracle he was alive.

"The doctor told me that the location of the break in his neck meant he would certainly be paralysed from the waist down, and possibly from the neck down. If the damage had been much higher, he would have been dead - he even said the guy would probably have been better off." Clark paused again, and his mouth tightened. He had been very angry with that emergency doctor... "Unfortunately, the man regained consciousness during that conversation. - I don't know when exactly, but soon enough to realise that we were talking about him, and to

understand exactly what was being said. So not only did I have to explain to him that I wouldn't be able to move him until I'd managed to find another way of propping up the remaining structure, but he had to lie there - in agony - knowing that he would be paralysed and that a doctor had said he would have been better off dead."

"How long did it take you to release him?" Lois asked in a whisper.

"Half an hour, though it felt like three times that," Clark answered. "I had to try to keep talking to him, at the same time as thinking through what I needed to do and actually doing it. The man - he told me his name, but I think I owe it to him not to tell anyone - was in a lot of pain, and very frightened. He told me that he was the only earner in his family... it had been his day off, otherwise he wouldn't even have been home - and all he could think about was that he would be a burden to his wife, and there would be no money coming in any more. Everything I could think of to say sounded like useless platitudes - how the *hell* could I have any comprehension of what he was going through? Me? I've never even had so much as a headache!" Apart from when there's Kryptonite about, Clark added silently, but since he tried very hard to keep the knowledge of the existence of that meteorite and its effect on him out of the news, he didn't mention it aloud.

"I wanted to get a paramedic in to give him a painkilling injection, but there was no way anyone else would have been able to get safely to where we were." Clark swallowed again, and let his gaze fall to the floor; his voice fell to a whisper. "I contemplated rendering him unconscious - I could have done it without hurting him, but I honestly couldn't say whether it would have been more for my own comfort than his."

Another pause. "Then, just as I was finally getting close to being able to free him, he called me over. He was crying... it was as much out of fear as pain. He told me he'd heard what the doctor had said - and he asked me to use my laser vision to sever his spinal cord. Twice, in the space of a couple of hours, desperate people asking me to end their lives... I thought I had seen the worst of human suffering, but tonight proved me wrong."

"You didn't, of course?" Lois prompted.

Clark shook his head. "I couldn't - of course not! I just... tried to tell him that things wouldn't be as bad as he feared, that there would be compensation, that his family would prefer to have him alive even if he was paralysed... but all the time I knew I was clutching at straws. Of course there should be compensation, but what if the landlord doesn't have insurance? It's a privately owned apartment block, but very run down; the police told me later that they had known it was a potential death-trap, but the owner has ignored all the enforcement notices the council slapped on him. But it's all some people can afford."

"So did you get him out?" Lois asked.

"Yes - not long after that, thankfully. And after that it was much easier to get to everyone else who was still trapped, and I managed to make the building safe for the investigators to get in." Clark studied his hands, as if wondering how they had managed to perform

all the tasks he had asked of them and still come away unscathed.

How could I have thought that this man has no feelings... Lois asked herself. Looking straight across at Superman, and meeting his eyes as he raised his gaze to meet hers, she asked, "Who would you normally talk to... you know, about something like this?"

Surprised, Clark replied, "No-one."

"How do you cope, then?" Lois demanded, almost thinking aloud. "Paramedics, fire officers, police... they all get offered counselling after this type of incident - post-traumatic stress, you know. But you - who helps you?"

Clark shrugged. "I manage."

Grimacing, Lois threw Superman an unconsciously pleading glance. "You must think I was... very unfair, not to mention appallingly insensitive." Her voice was soft, low.

Clark winced inwardly; this was precisely what he had intended to prove when he'd come to Lois's apartment, but his original aim had quickly disappeared as he'd realised that he found talking to Lois about the evening's events was somehow... cathartic. Her silent but very obvious sympathy and understanding had genuinely helped him to clear his mind of the appalling memories which, he was well aware, would otherwise have given him nightmares. As it was, the images were still clear in his mind, but he was now nearer to being convinced that he had done all he could to help. Now, he was no longer tortured with thoughts of 'if only'... if only I had got there sooner, if only I had gone to this person first instead of that one... No doubt he would still experience exactly the same regrets and doubts after the next rescue he carried out; but tonight he would sleep.

What *was* it about Lois Lane which enabled her to understand him, without his even having to explain to her? How could she have known about the agonies of doubt and regret which he suffered after a disaster like this? How, in addition, had her perception of him altered so much in little more than twelve hours - for it clearly had? He felt drawn to her yet again, and experienced an almost irresistible impulse to take her in his arms and kiss her as he had done the night before, regardless of the danger to his secret identity.

Realising that Lois was waiting for an answer, Clark met her eyes in an attempt to give her an honest response. "This morning, yes, I did think that you were judging me unfairly, and that you weren't approaching the situation with an open mind. But I can see, now, that my judgement of you was also unfair - you are more than capable of putting aside a preconceived view in the face of evidence to the contrary." Afraid that in his attempt to maintain a distance between them he had sounded too formal, too stilted, Clark got to his feet and approached Lois.

"You're right when you said that I need - help, someone to talk to, after something like this. Usually I just... sublimate my feelings, and try to get on with what I have to do." < And I blame myself, always wondering, obsessing about whether I could have done more, got there faster...> "But it has helped me more than I could ever have

imagined, talking to you about it. I want to thank you for that, Ms Lane." He held out his hand to her, not trusting himself to demonstrate his thanks in any more intimate manner - and realising that, in any case, she might well resent it. She accepted his hand, however, and took it between her two much smaller ones.

"You know, Superman, there is something that Clark and I can do to help - which might reassure you more," she added as she released his hand. "We'll be writing about the explosion, covering the facts of course - but we can also argue for better enforcement of buildings regulations, and mandatory insurance cover. And we have contacts at newspapers in Chicago, so we can try to see that the same kind of article runs in papers there."

Clark inclined his head, one of the gestures he had adopted as part of his disguise, and backed away towards Lois's window. "Thank you for your time, Ms Lane," he said formally as he stepped up onto the window-ledge. He flew off, leaving only a flapping curtain as a reminder of his visit.

Frowning, Lois padded to the kitchen to make more fresh coffee. Superman's visit had been a real shock: not merely that he should visit her at all, but that he should talk to her in the way he had. It was clear to her that his initial intention had been to shock her. He had pulled no punches in some of his descriptions, and when he had asked whether she had ever seen anything like some of the horrors he had described, she had noticed, in a detached sort of way, that he had appeared to be watching her reaction. Perhaps he had been attempting to convince her that she had been wrong about him... but why would he have wanted to do that, she wondered. Did it really matter to someone like Superman what one reporter thought of him? Despite what she had said to him earlier, she considered that Superman was too confident, hard even, to care what people thought about him. Although perhaps he wasn't as tough, or as thick-skinned, as she had believed, Lois reflected, remembering the pain in his eyes as he had talked about the disaster scene. That had not been the face of someone who didn't care about the fate of other human beings.

< Other human beings? What am I talking about... he's not human! He's from another planet!> she reminded herself scathingly.

From another planet or not, that is a man who cares deeply about the world in which he finds himself and the people he encounters in that world, Lois accepted. Bringing her replenished mug over to her desk and booting up her PC, she conceded that she had been wrong about quite a few things that day.

She called up her Superman file and began to make notes, her fingers quickly flying over the keys as she deleted some of her earlier thoughts and replaced them with her impressions from her most recent encounter with the Man of Steel. < There's more than one way of being vulnerable> she mused as she typed. It occurred to Lois that, while Superman might be invulnerable in the physical sense, he was far from being so as far as his emotions were concerned. It occurred to her that this must make his task far more difficult. Over her years as a journalist, she had occasionally spoken to emergency workers and health care employees, all of whom had talked of the need to develop a hard outward shell, to learn *not* to care about the people they

had to help in the line of their work. If they allowed themselves to become too involved in their work, to care too much, it would be impossible to carry on doing the job. No-one could cope with that degree of stress.

Yet Superman clearly had not yet learned the lesson about caring too much. How could he survive, dealing with the kind of pain and suffering he encountered on an almost daily basis, knowing that he could not be everywhere at once, and that sometimes he might get to an accident scene just too late to help someone? It was clear from what he'd said that he had no-one he could talk to about his feelings, and yet it was obvious, based on his reactions this evening, that he was deeply affected by what he saw and did, Lois knew. Why hadn't he cracked up long before now?

And another consequence of what Superman had told her dawned on her. If he had no-one to talk to, then it looked as if there was no-one special in his life. A number of the articles Lois had read had considered the possibility that Superman might have a girlfriend, and a few had even suggested some possibilities; one of the scandal-sheets had even run a highly implausible story about a woman claiming that she had given birth to Superman's love-child. Lois frowned. Did that mean this was another way in which he differed from humans - that Superman was not interested in women, or relationships - that Kryptonians didn't see sex, or love, as part of their lives? How did they reproduce, then? she puzzled.

About to make some notes on her computer about this aspect of Superman's life, she paused. He had kissed her, and although it had been a fleeting gesture Lois thought she had had enough experience of men to realise that it wasn't a kiss from someone in any way inexperienced in the art of kissing. Superman knew what he was doing in that department, all right. So was he between relationships? Or did he have someone he was involved with, but with whom he simply didn't discuss his work?

Lois scratched her nose, deep in thought. If he *was* - or even had been - involved with somebody, surely someone would know about it? It simply wouldn't be possible to keep that sort of relationship secret - look how difficult it was for pop stars or other celebrities to stop their love lives ending up on the front pages of the tabloids. They often even had to wear a disguise just to visit friends...

A disguise...! Lois jerked upright and stared blankly ahead. Yes, Superman would be recognised if he was seen visiting someone, but what if he went in disguise? Without the suit, wearing ordinary casual clothes, he might not look that much out of the ordinary. Just a little over average height, a baseball cap to hide the distinctive dark hair, perhaps - even dark glasses. And a baggy jacket or sweat-top would certainly hide the muscularity of his shoulders and torso.

Frowning, Lois considered the possibility. She had wondered once or twice just where Superman went when he was not rescuing people, and why no-one seemed to know. But this idea of a disguise - which she had stumbled on by accident - seemed to offer a solution. Did Superman disguise himself as an ordinary man when he wasn't saving people? And if so, what did he do? Did he have a normal job, an apartment, friends... and did any of those friends know the truth about him? If not, how did he explain the need to disappear every

time he needed to remove the disguise and attend an emergency?

Perhaps this disguise idea needs a little more work, Lois thought as she shut down her computer. There were too many holes in the theory just at the moment. But if she was right, and Superman did pretend to be an normal man - and she was able to penetrate the disguise and expose him - it could be a Pulitzer-winning story.

But at the expense of destroying what little privacy the man has? her conscience pointed out.

Lois sighed and went to bed.

Clark landed on the balcony of his apartment and super-spiced into the shower, grateful for the opportunity to wash away the dust and debris of the disaster scene. He stayed in the shower stall for several minutes, contrary to his usual practice of showering in seconds; although he knew it would take a long time for the images of his evening's work to disappear from his mind, he felt as if the act of cleansing himself, over and over, might help to cleanse his over-active imagination.

Sometimes he hated his work as Superman. Most of the time, he was glad to be able to help; grateful that his powers allowed him to intervene and save lives. Yet at other times he almost cursed the dead planet which had bequeathed to him his extraordinary powers. Without his Kryptonian origins, he would never have been helping to dig out bodies after an earthquake or an avalanche, never have had to rescue badly-burned, screaming people from fires, never have to pull horrific remnants of what had been human beings out of the wreckage which resulted from the appalling consequences of their own mistakes. Lois Lane's observation had been amazingly accurate, Clark reflected wryly as he padded into his bedroom, a towel clinging about his waist. He, alone of all those who helped to deal with the appalling consequences of natural disasters and human error, had no safety-valve, no-one whom he could confide in or seek comfort from.

< If my parents had lived...> he thought, not for the first time since donning the red and blue suit.

Martha and Jonathan Kent would have understood, Clark felt; not only his desire to help, but his need to feel, in every circumstance, that he had done all that he could to save life and harm. His parents had died before any of them had realised just what powers he would possess; although it had been clear that he wasn't quite like any ordinary ten-year-old, there had been no indication that he would be able to see through things, or have such a degree of super-strength - and certainly not that he would be able to fly. The Kents had always been fearful that someone in officialdom would at some stage find out that the story they had always put about concerning Clark's origins was false, and so they had tried to keep the few indications that he was... different... a secret. Yet they would have approved of Superman, Clark was sure.

And so, now, it was hugely ironic that the one person with whom Clark felt that he had found a degree of empathy, who genuinely understood

how he felt about his need to help, actually disliked Superman. He didn't believe that his discussion with Lois would change her mind about the fundamental questions she still had concerning Superman. She had accepted that his desire to help others was genuine, yet he knew that she would still be doubting his bona fides in other respects, for instance in relation to apprehending criminals.

Flopping down heavily on his bed - to which he had added reinforcement some time ago, after destroying the previous one simply by sitting down on it too heavily one day, Clark reflected again on his conversation with Lois. He had intended to make her suffer, to force her to view the scene in Chicago through his eyes, and by doing so to make her accept that her opinion of him had been wrong. However, instead of hurting her, she had comforted him. He wondered whether Lois had any idea of just how much she had helped him that evening.

Closing his eyes, Clark drifted into an exhausted, dreamless sleep.

As she was preparing to leave her apartment the following morning, Lois was disturbed by a knock on the door. Expecting to see a police officer, she was taken aback when she looked through the peephole and saw Clark.

She unbolted and opened the door, mixed feelings in her mind at the thought of seeing her partner. She hadn't spoken to Clark since his abrupt departure from the Planet the previous evening; although she had intended to phone him and apologise, Superman's arrival had put paid to that idea. She was aware that she still owed Clark an apology. Lois knew that she had been in the wrong, and one thing she had always prided herself on was admitting to her mistakes. She was well aware that she could frequently be arrogant in her desire to prove herself right, and that she often managed to put people's backs up as a result. That she considered to be a completely legitimate way of doing her job. But if she screwed up, she made amends.

Inviting Clark in, she took a deep breath and said, "I'm glad you're here, Clark - I wanted to talk to you."

"You did?" Clark was taken aback. He had journeyed to Lois's apartment with the express intention of escorting her to work, ostensibly to ensure her safety, but in fact because - with their discussion of the previous evening still fresh in his mind - he had wanted to try to put their disagreement behind them. He was aware, however, that Lois had no idea that the person she had entertained in her apartment a mere nine hours previously was in fact her temporary partner, so he had planned to take a careful approach to the discussion. After all, Clark Kent should have no idea that Lois had apologised and back-tracked a little in her attitude towards Superman, unless Clark was prepared to use yet again the excuse that he had 'talked to Superman'. He wasn't sure that he wanted to do that this time.

And yet, as far as Lois was concerned, her relationship with Clark was still frosty; still lying unresolved between them was the fact that she had accused him of unprofessionalism. He admitted to himself

what he had secretly been aware of all along: that she hadn't really meant it; she had simply been striking back after his own attack on her for her behaviour towards Superman. He certainly hadn't needed to attack her in the way he had, he conceded. He had been as much to blame for the argument as she had. And her behaviour the previous evening had demonstrated beyond any doubt that the real Lois Lane was honest, sincere, loyal and a true friend. The arrogance and stubborn pride which were also parts of her character were probably survival techniques, learned of necessity through being a woman in a very male world, Clark reflected. And in any case, he asked himself, would he really like a Lois Lane without those characteristics? He admitted that he wouldn't.

He was recalled to the present by Lois's voice, slightly impatient, saying his name. "Clark? You were in another world!"

Throwing her an apologetic smile, he turned to face her. "Sorry, Lois, I was thinking... I wanted to talk to you too, as it happens."

"Yeah?" Lois was curious, but determined to say her piece first. "Clark, about yesterday, I want to apologise - "

"Me too," he interrupted her. "I over-reacted - how you conduct an interview for a story I'm not involved in is none of my business."

"No, Clark," Lois quickly responded, placing her hand on his arm. "The problem was, you were right. I did go too far with my questions to Superman, and I'm not surprised he complained to you. And then I jumped down your throat for daring to criticise me." She paused, and met Clark's eyes. "The thing is, I knew at the time you were right, and I was embarrassed - I covered up by blaming you. I'm sorry, Clark, and I'd really hate to think I'd ruined a good working relationship."

He shook his head. "You haven't. We were both to blame, and we can both agree to put it behind us." He glanced downwards to where her hand still rested on his forearm, and covered it briefly with his own. "May I escort you to work, Lois?"

She grinned at the old-world charm of his request; for a man who was so thoroughly modern in many other ways, Clark's characteristic courtesy was sometimes reminiscent of another era. While Lois preferred to be treated as an equal by colleagues, she was discovering that she actually liked Clark's occasional chivalrous gestures. Collecting her bag and coat, she allowed him to guide her out of her apartment.

The police officer on duty confirmed with them that they were going to the Planet, and informed them that while the police department was unable to supply her with an escort for the entire day, someone would be 'in the area' if needed.

"I don't *need* a guard!" Lois growled as they exited the apartment building.

"Lois, there have been two attempts on your life since you got back to Metropolis!" Clark insisted. "You need protection."

"Yes, well, you're with me, and while I'm at the Planet there's not much anyone can do to get at me - unless they poison the coffee, and to tell the truth I don't know how anyone could tell the difference!" she retorted.

Recognising the frustration in her voice, Clark threw her a sympathetic smile. He knew how he would feel if his movements were being circumscribed by others, no matter how much they were motivated by concerns for his safety. However, he also didn't want any harm to come to Lois. He slung his arm around her shoulders and gave her a reassuring squeeze, then changed the subject.

"So - what's the plan for today? Any ideas on how to progress the story?"

Lois shrugged. "We don't have any new leads since yesterday, unless Jimmy or Jack have managed to come up with anything. That gate-check at the harbour didn't come to anything. I still think we should go for a Luthor interview."

Clark considered for a moment; he certainly wouldn't object to bearding Lex Luthor in his den. "We could, though I doubt he'd agree to it - he'd probably try to fob us off with the usual publicity handout. We need to do our homework before that, though - my guess is that he's far too smart to be taken off guard by a couple of questions from left field."

"Yeah, though I'd like to ask him about his dealings with Brentford," Lois replied. "And why he has an ex-Secret Service agent working for him."

"Hmmm," Clark mused. "It might do for a start, but we need to do a little more digging. I'll try talking to my contacts at the Mayor's office again, see if we can get some more information on what this St John guy might be up to."

At the Planet, the day's papers were scattered around the newsroom: the explosion in Chigaco made front-page headlines in a couple of Metropolis papers, while the rest focused on a more local story. Lois was surprised that so little interest was shown in such a major disaster, particularly considering that Metropolis's own super-hero had been involved. Flicking through that morning's Planet, she was even more surprised to discover, on an inside page, an exclusive interview with Superman about the incident, by Clark Kent.

"When did you file this, Clark?" she enquired, raising an eyebrow at her partner.

Clark glanced up from his own survey of the explosion coverage; he had plans for a follow-up story and wanted to ensure that he hadn't been beaten to it. < What if I told you I flew here straight after leaving your place, typed the story at super-speed up in the library without being seen, and sent it across the network to the night editor?> he thought wryly. But he attempted to meet her eyes with a convincingly innocent expression, and shrugged. "Superman stopped by my apartment late last night - I let him use my washing machine, it's less public than a laundrette - and he gave me an interview while he was there. Sort of a favour for a favour, I guess."

Lois frowned. "He washes his clothes at your place?"

"Well, his suits do need cleaning occasionally," Clark replied, now a little wary. Just what was Lois imagining - or had it been a perfectly innocent question?

"I suppose that explains the number of exclusives you get," Lois remarked idly, appearing to lose interest in the subject. Inwardly, however, her brain was ticking over at a furious rate. Clark clearly knew Superman better than anyone else - if the super-hero did have a secret identity, then Clark was highly likely to be aware of it. However, it was extremely unlikely that Clark would confide in her, particularly since he was aware of her attitude to Superman. She would have to watch Clark Kent very closely - and see whether she could trick him into letting anything slip. But in order to do that, she would have to pretend a complete lack of interest in Clark's relationship with the Man of Steel.

She briefly experienced a sensation of guilt about the direction of her thoughts. Clark was the first man she had felt close to for a very long time. He appeared to be a genuinely open, honest and *good* human being... and he had been very kind and understanding where her fears about returning to work were concerned. He had been immensely reassuring, and had kept her confidences to himself. She knew instinctively that he was a man she could trust. And there was the memory of that kiss... she couldn't remember ever before having been so disturbed by just one kiss. And here she was, cold-bloodedly planning to use Clark for her story!

< But if I'm right, and I uncover Superman's identity, this could be the one which wins me the Pulitzer!> she argued. Her conscience would not be calmed that easily, however, reminding her that a Pulitzer would be cold comfort if she ended up alone and friendless, stigmatised as someone who could not be trusted.

< But that's what journalism's all about!> she pointed out. Is it? her conscience retorted. Is it really necessary to betray friends and expose secrets which are not to do with criminality, or hypocrisy, or deceit?

Lois forced her contrary thoughts from her mind, resolving to think about it later, when she was alone. Right now, she reminded herself, there's a more pressing story to get on with!

The two reporters busied themselves in further digging into Lex Luthor's various activities, and attempted to discover what, if any, legitimate business interests Luthor might have in common with Mayor Leeson and Brentford. Nothing sprang immediately to mind, and when Jack's investigations into the dead men also turned up no new leads, Lois was ready to implode with frustration.

"I *know* Luthor's involved in this, I'm sure of it!" she exclaimed, exasperated.

Perry White strolled over. "I heard you two were digging into Lex Luthor's activities. Now you know I don't like to interfere with my reporters' investigations, but I just want to warn you both. Luthor has a lot of influence in this city, and he knows just about all the Planet's board of directors, not to mention the major stockholders."

Lois stared at her editor-in-chief. "Are you telling us to lay off Luthor because the big bosses upstairs might have a problem with it?" As she spoke, Clark straightened and subtly moved so that he was standing just behind her, allowing his body language to suggest that he was backing her up completely.

Perry sighed. "Now you know better than that, Lois. I just want to be sure that you have some good evidence for whatever it is you think Luthor is involved in. I'm not going to run anything without hard evidence - and I'd sure as hell rather Luthor didn't know what you were up to before you have some hard evidence to show him."

"Afraid of lawsuits, Perry?" Clark enquired, his voice deceptively pleasant.

The Editor of the Planet snorted. "The day I'm afraid of a lawsuit will be the day I turn in my press card." His voice lowered, and the Southern drawl almost disappeared. "My information is Luthor's a dangerous man. I don't want either of you ending up at the bottom of Hobb's Bay."

Lois glanced quickly at Clark, who returned her surprised expression. "Chief?" Clark enquired. "What do you know about him?"

Perry jerked his head towards his office, and they quickly entered and shut the door. As Lois and Clark took up positions in front of his desk, Perry spoke quickly. "None of this is provable. But I've heard from a few different sources that Luthor has a ruthless way of dealing with people who cross him - and I don't just mean he uses a few dirty business tactics. People too scared to talk publicly have told me he's got criminal contacts, and they've also suggested there's several question-marks over how he made all his money. But I don't know how in the hell we could prove any of this, and from what I've heard, if he thought we were even discussing it he'd probably arrange one or two 'accidents'. That's why I want you to be careful."

Raising an eyebrow, Clark observed, "Well, what we think at the moment is that Luthor may be behind the 'accidents' which nearly killed Lois. We already know that Luthor's closest associate is a former spy who Lois recognised as one of Brentwood's associates in the gun-running thing. The guy seems to be working for the Mayor as well."

Perry looked thoughtful, tapping a pencil against his desk. Then he scratched his brow and spoke slowly. "Why would Luthor want to help Leeson get re-elected?" He paused. "Have you had Jimmy check out her finances - her personal bank accounts, as well as the campaign stuff?"

Frowning, Clark commented, "I checked out the campaign accounts some time ago - nothing unusual, the normal kind of donations, and Luthor had made a contribution."

"Could Luthor's assistant simply be helping with the campaign?" Perry suggested.

Lois favoured him with a sarcastic glance. "I don't believe that, Chief, and I don't see how you can. This guy St John is an ex-spy, and from what Clark's seen Leeson seems to be afraid of him. He's not

just a junior aide loaned to the campaign as a favour."

"Okay, then get someone to check out Leeson's private finances and any policy decisions in the pipeline which could benefit Luthor," Perry ordered.

"Already on the policy issue, Chief - I haven't come up with anything so far," Clark replied. "I can get Jimmy to look up her financial records, though my guess is Luthor will have been too smart to have anything traceable back to him."

"Well, just keep at it, but be very careful," Perry finished. "I'm prepared to back you two up if I get questions from upstairs, but I'd prefer not to have the Planet paying out survivors' benefits on your pension schemes in the near future."

< What survivors?> Clark mused wryly as they exited the editor's office. He had no next-of-kin; perhaps he should arrange for his effects to be left to charity, he thought idly. Although there was probably no hurry, since there was little chance of anyone bringing his existence to a precipitate end in the near future.

"This is **so** frustrating!" Lois grumbled later that day, as Clark shook his head over yet another list of business dealings of companies associated with Lex Luthor. "There's **nothing** in any of these - but I **know** Luthor's up to something. I just know it!" They had spent most of the day searching through documents, bank records, computer records, hoping to find anything concrete which might tie any of the principals together. At least, **Lois** had spent most of the day at it: Clark had disappeared a couple of times and had been very vague about his intentions on each occasion. Lois had been quite annoyed at this: they were supposed to be working together, but her partner suddenly wasn't pulling his weight. She had favoured him with a ferocious glare when he had returned the second time: he'd been gone almost an hour and had only been able to give the explanation that he'd had some business at the bank.

"Get yourself an Internet-based account, why don't you?" she had growled, before pushing several files in front of him. He had simply raised an eyebrow before applying himself to the work. But despite his apparent casualness, Lois had been forced to admit Clark wasn't a slacker: he had diligently worked his way through the files at an impressively fast rate.

A little later, Lois had actually stumbled upon something. She had decided to step back from the Luthor - St John - Brentford triangle and try another angle. She had realised that she knew very little about the outgoing Mayor, Patricia Leeson. She remembered Perry's remark: "She came from nowhere to win the last election three years ago..." So where had Leeson come from?

Clark would have looked at all of this, Lois mused; it would have been part of his background research, he would even have mentioned it in a profile of Leeson. She had called up Clark's election coverage stories from the Planet intranet archives, but the background details were hazy. On querying this with Clark, he had told her that Leeson's own PR handouts were not very forthcoming on the subject. "They

usually list her qualifications and personal background, and say that she worked in administration for ten years while she was a city councillor. No-one seems to know much more than that."

Lois had frowned. "How does she get away with that?"

Clark had shrugged. "No-one seemed particularly concerned. I guess I should have dug a bit deeper there, but I initially figured she was going to lose so she'd be yesterday's news."

"Let me dig a bit," Lois had replied, and she had commenced searching for any mention of Leeson in the many databases the Planet had access to. After about twenty minutes, she had finally stumbled upon the Mayor's employment history. What she saw almost made her fall off her chair.

"Clark! Look at this!"

Clark had wheeled his chair closer and directed his gaze to Lois's computer screen. "Leeson worked for Brentford?" He was stunned.

"Yeah. But what I can't understand is why it was so difficult to find that out. Why would she want to hide it? Why not just list Brentco as her previous employer? Why did I have to search half-a-dozen databases to find it, and why was her employment record accessible only by using her date of birth?"

"Beats me." Clark had been as baffled as Lois.

"So it gets even more tangled," Lois had mused aloud. "Leeson worked for Brentford, Brentford was doing deals with St John, possibly over arms, St John is 'helping' Leeson's re-election campaign, St John works for Luthor..."

"And Luthor is an open supporter of Leeson, and lent Brentford his yacht," Clark had concluded. "Seems to me the common link between all of them is Luthor."

"Yes, looks like it," Lois had agreed. "Problem is, nothing we've found so far is proof of any wrong-doing." She had sighed, and put the issue of Leeson aside to concentrate again on Luthor's business dealings.

Clark now sighed and gestured in the direction of the coffee machine, a look of enquiry on his face. At Lois's resigned nod, he collected cups for the two of them and returned to her desk, which they had been sharing while going through the paperwork. Sipping his coffee, he raised an eyebrow at Lois. "Maybe we should try for that Luthor interview after all?"

"Well, I thought we should do that yesterday," Lois retorted, reaching for her phone. "I'll set it up."

"If he'll see us," Clark reminded her. "Luthor doesn't give interviews."

"He hasn't come across Lois Lane yet," she assured him, a glint in her eyes which any Planet old-timer would have recognised.

"Don't forget I have a pretty good reputation in this city too," Clark pointed out. "And I have tried, plenty of times."

Choosing to interpret Clark's words as a challenge, Lois used her most persuasive manner when speaking to Lex Luthor's personal secretary. Clark, leaning back in his chair, could only listen in admiration at this display of Lois Lane the human bulldozer. Nothing the secretary could say, it seemed, would put off this tenacious young woman; she had an answer for every excuse. Finally, the secretary confirmed that Lex Luthor did indeed have an opening in his diary the following afternoon, but that she would have to check with him before confirming the appointment. Clark saw Lois's expression turn to exultation at this point, only to look disappointed again as, it appeared, the secretary would be unable to speak with her employer immediately - it seemed that he was out of the country.

"So when will you be able to confirm the appointment?" Lois demanded, then listened. "Okay, then I'll call you first thing in the morning to confirm it. No, *I'll* call *you*."

As she replaced the receiver, Lois turned her gaze to Clark, her dark hair swinging as she moved. She didn't speak, but her smug expression seemed to shout, "See? I succeeded where you failed."

He smiled; he couldn't help himself around this extraordinary woman. "Nice work, Lane, but hadn't we better wait until tomorrow to count our chickens? Luthor can still refuse."

Lois, however, grinned cockily at him. "Nope - he won't. He'll see us."

Clark glanced at his watch; he was tired. It had been a long day, and the two rescues he had carried out as Superman had been stressful, especially after his activities in Chicago the previous day. He just felt like having an evening off. He wondered... would Lois...? He decided to take a risk.

Turning to face his partner, he tried to assume a nonchalant tone. "Lois, I've about had it for today, and I don't think there's much more we could do anyway. How about I take you out for dinner? I don't mean work.. it'd be nice to get away from all this..." He gestured at the piles of paper on Lois's desk, wondering whether he'd been too casual, or too pushy. It was so hard to tell how Lois was likely to react.

Lois was taken by surprise at Clark's invitation. Was he asking her out, or did he simply intend that, as two friends, they should share a meal? She decided to test his intentions. She tossed her hair back and smiled casually at him.

"Sounds nice, Clark, but I wouldn't mind taking a shower and changing first - what sort of place do you have in mind?" < There - that should do it> she thought. < If he just meant a friendly outing, he'd suggest somewhere like a wine bar or a pizza place> She watched him carefully.

Clark was trying to remember what he knew about the type of food Lois liked. Inspiration struck, and he threw her an inquiring glance. "Italian? There's a pretty good restaurant a few blocks from my place - it's quiet and low-key, and the food's great."

< Quiet... sounds romantic> Lois thought in surprise. < *Is* he asking me out?> Aloud, she agreed, and they collected their belongings and left the Planet building.

They decided to walk to their respective apartments, and then Clark would come back to Lois's to escort her to the restaurant. She protested, insisting that she was well able to make her own way there, but he wouldn't hear of it. "When I take a woman out for the evening, she gets door-to-door service," he insisted seriously. "And anyway, I haven't forgotten someone's out to kill you, even if you have," he spoilt the mood by adding.

< When I take a woman out for the evening...> He *does* see this as a date... or an almost-date, Lois realised. A warm feeling invaded her body as she realised that she wanted this to be a date. She wanted Clark to take her in his arms again, to kiss her senseless as he had done two days ago. She wanted him to do much more...

"Lois! Look out!" Lois awoke from her reverie to realise that Clark had grabbed her by her arms and was hustling her at great speed across the road and onto the pavement opposite. Before she had time to react, a car sped past at a reckless speed, then appeared to go out of control and crash.

They had been crossing at a deserted intersection near Lois's apartment when Clark's super-hearing had caught the sound of a car approaching at speed. He had expected it to slow down on approaching the red light, but instead the engine noise had simply increased. He had realised that the driver was deliberately heading straight for them. His instinct had been simply to grab Lois and fly them both high above the street, but he had over-ridden that impulse, instead gripping her by her upper arms. He had run at near super-speed and deposited Lois on the pavement before turning back to stare after the car. Dipping his head so that he was able to see over the rim of his glasses, he had sent darts of heat vision to the rear tyres of the car. Both had burst, and the driver had crashed into a stationary truck.

With a shout of "Stay there, Lois," Clark ran off down the street towards the car. The driver was slumped over the wheel, blood streaming from his forehead. Clark wrenched the door open and pushed the man back against the seat.

"Who are you? Who paid you to do this?" he rapped furiously.

The driver stared blearily at Clark. "What..." He dragged a hand up to his face. "I'm bleeding! Get an ambulance!"

"Not until you tell me why you tried to run us over," Clark insisted angrily.

But he was foiled in his intentions; other people had been alerted to the incident by the noise of the crash, and they were milling around trying to see what had happened. Someone had clearly alerted the emergency services, and a police car and ambulance drew up shortly afterwards. Clark felt someone touch his arm, and glanced around to see Lois.

"Are you all right, Clark?" she asked softly.

He took a deep breath. "Yeah, I'm fine - just angry that someone tried to run us down in broad daylight," he admitted. Then he remembered his rough-and-ready rescue of Lois, and asked, concerned, "Are you okay, Lois? I just kind of grabbed you..."

She nodded, her hair swinging with the movement. "I'm fine - and thank you for saving my life. Again," she added softly. Then she hesitated, looking from Clark to the wrecked car, a low-slung sports vehicle. "Clark - are you sure it was deliberate?" she asked.

He nodded, a grim expression on his face. "The guy was headed straight for us, and he ran the red light."

"But he crashed...?" Lois replied, looking puzzled. "It looked to me like he'd lost control of the car. Maybe the brakes failed or something."

Clark, who was well aware that brake failure had nothing to do with the vehicle's crash, shook his head. "Lois, if you were driving a car and the brakes failed, wouldn't you try to alert pedestrians to the fact that they were in danger? You'd hit the horn and keep your hand on it, and you'd sure as hell swerve to avoid people. That guy did neither."

"Well, the police forensics will check the car out," Lois suggested. "And the driver will be interviewed."

"I'll make sure of that," Clark promised. "I'm going to call Henderson as soon as we get to your place."

Once the police officers at the accident scene had taken their details, the reporters continued on their route, though the mood of both was now sombre. Lois was considering how, for the third time in as many days, she had come close to being killed. It occurred to her that on this occasion Clark had also almost become a victim. She presumed his silence was also due to shock at his close brush with death.

Clark was brooding on his failure, so far, to catch the person or people responsible for attempting to kill Lois. He was pretty sure, as was Lois, that Nigel St John was behind the burglary and bloody-trap, but was it St John who had set up the other 'accidents', or was St John merely acting on someone else's orders? Lex Luthor's, perhaps?

Clark briefly contemplated sending Superman to pay a visit to Lex Luthor, to warn him off any further attempts on Lois Lane's life. But he discarded the idea; it would be a bad idea to let the tycoon know that he was suspected in any way. It could also be extremely dangerous for Lois if anyone suspected that she held some degree of importance for the Man of Steel: he had no wish to provide anyone with a bargaining counter to be used against himself. And, however hard he tried, Clark was well aware that he could not be everywhere at once: there was no way he could protect Lois twenty-four hours a day. No, better leave Superman out of this for now, he conceded.

At Lois's apartment, Clark came in and called Henderson. The detective was at first sceptical, suggesting - as Lois had done - that perhaps the driver had simply lost control, and once he had

accepted that it had been an attempted hit-and-run, suggesting that it could have been a random occurrence. Clark wasn't at all convinced, and finally the detective agreed to look into it. Clark filled Lois in on the details of his conversation, and left her to go to his own place.

Lois showered and changed, trying not to allow herself to dwell on what could have happened. Again her life had been threatened; again, Clark had saved her. That was twice he had saved her life - or perhaps she should call it three times, she mused, since it was Clark who had suggested the possibility that her apartment might have been booby-trapped. Her thoughts flew back to the village community who had adopted her as a member for almost four years. According to their tribal customs, to save a life was to own it. Therefore, as the chief would have told Lois, her life now belonged to Clark....

< I don't belong to anyone> Lois protested silently. < But if I had to belong to someone, Clark Kent would be... pretty acceptable....>

She was coming to realise that she felt safer when she was with Clark than with anyone else. Why that should be she wasn't sure; he was just an ordinary man after all. It wasn't as if she was with Superman, or had a police escort: he was simply a work colleague who looked as if he worked out a few times a week. He might be able to beat off a mugger, but he could hardly stop a bullet with his bare hands, she mused with a self-critical grimace. And yet... there was something about him.

< All right, all right, I could really go for him> Lois admitted to herself, for the first time. But why him? Okay, he was certainly very attractive, but why did Clark make her feel quite so... weak-kneed when he kissed her? Lois wondered whether it was simply the effect of abstention: four years away from civilisation had also meant four years away from having a man in her life - and yes, sex. Funny, though... she hadn't been sexually involved with anyone for well over a year before leaving Metropolis, and she hadn't missed it then. Why now?

< Because you're falling in love with Clark> a little voice from somewhere inside her suggested. Lois protested at that: she couldn't possibly be in love with anyone, least of all someone she had only known less than two weeks! And anyway... she wasn't sure she believed in love any more. Not after watching her parents, who had after all professed to love one another once upon a time, tear each other apart in that hell they had called a marriage. No, Lois had no intention of falling in love.

A rap at the door disturbed her contemplation, and she peered through the spy-hole to see the object of her reflections on the other side. Clark had changed from his business suit into dark chinos, she noticed as she let him in, with a blue shirt buttoned up to the collar. He smiled at her, and her insides felt about to melt. < How does he manage to do that to me?> she appealed to something inside herself. Attempting to maintain an outward calm, she observed that Clark had managed to get changed and back to her place very quickly.

He threw her an easy grin. "I don't hang around, Lois. Ready to go?"

"Sure." She reached for a coat and followed him from the apartment. "Let's hope we don't run into any more hit-and-run drivers."

As they walked, Clark filled Lois in on the latest developments. "Henderson called me shortly after I got home - he'd made contact with the officers investigating the incident and he'll interview the driver tomorrow. He's also requested the results of any forensic tests on the car, and he promised to call me tomorrow when he has them."

Lois raised an eyebrow at Clark. "This detective - Henderson - he seems to think pretty highly of you."

Clark shrugged. "I've helped him out once or twice, and he returns the favour by letting me have inside information now and then. He knows I won't publish anything which might damage an investigation."

"Useful," Lois commented. "I used to have my own contacts at a couple of precincts, but this Henderson seems to be quite influential." Remembering something else then, she threw Clark a quizzical glance. "You know, you moved pretty fast back there - I couldn't believe how quickly you hustled me off the road."

For a brief moment Clark panicked, wondering if he had given himself away to this highly astute woman; then the sense of self-preservation he had spent most of his life cultivating came into its own. "I guess it was adrenaline, Lois - you know, when you're in shock you can do pretty strange things."

She grunted, appearing to accept his explanation, and changed the subject.

They chatted easily on the way to the restaurant; on arrival, Lois was very pleasantly surprised at its decor and atmosphere. The tables were well spaced out, with intimate booths along the side walls; all tables had candles which provided most of the interior lighting. The walls were coated in textured paint, with Robert Doisneau posters and facsimilies of Italian newspapers hanging in frames. The proprietor hurried up to greet them, and Clark amazed Lois by carrying on a conversation in Italian.

When they had been shown to their booth and left with copies of the menu, Lois whispered, "He's really Italian, then?"

"Yep," Clark replied in a low voice. "Left Naples when he was nineteen, married a second-generation Italian woman he met in New York, and stayed. They moved to Metropolis and he opened this place a couple of years ago."

"How come you speak Italian?" Lois asked, impressed.

He smiled, pleased beyond reason to see that he had managed to surprise her. "I spent about six months in Rome when I was in Europe. I'm pretty good at languages, so I learned enough to get by."

"How many languages do you speak?" Lois demanded, wondering just what else there was to learn about this man.

He shrugged. "Fluently, about half-a-dozen. I can get by in probably a dozen or so others." < And order dinner in something like 357> he thought with amusement. < But it would probably look too boastful to tell her that....>

Lois's eyes widened. "Wow." She shook her head. "It just makes me feel so insular. You know, before I went to the Congo I only knew about a dozen phrases in French, and how to order maybe twenty dishes in Chinese." Her smile faded, and her expression grew distant. "While I was out there, I learned a lot more French, and I guess I became pretty fluent in the local dialect as well. It all seems so long ago... I can't remember much of it now."

Clark reached across the table and placed his hand on top of Lois's; it felt warm and comforting, and she turned her palm over so that she could curl her fingers around his. His grip was reassuring, and as she raised her eyes to his face he was gazing at her with a concerned, almost loving expression. His eyes held hers, and he asked softly, "Does it hurt to remember?"

She shook her head, not breaking the eye contact. "No - they were so good to me, Clark. They had every right to be suspicious - I was a foreigner, a Westerner, and I almost brought danger and guns into their midst. Yet they hid me, and looked after me, and fed me, and allowed me to stay with them. I'd never have survived on my own in the jungle. I owe them my life."

Feeling as though he understood what was going through Lois's mind, Clark suggested gently, "Did you feel safer there than you did in Metropolis?"

The question surprised Lois; reflecting for a moment, she realised that Clark's suggestion was uncannily accurate. "I suppose I did," she replied slowly. "Like I said to you, I knew the ambush was deliberate - okay, while I was staying in the village I didn't remember anything about it. But I suppose it's possible that my sub-conscious was trying to tell me that I would be safer if I just stayed there and forgot."

Clark squeezed her hand briefly. "I hope you don't mind my saying that I'm very glad you remembered who you are, and that you came back to Metropolis." He continued to meet her eyes, although he was inwardly quaking as he wondered how she would respond to this very clear indication of his feelings for her.

Lois caught her breath. All of her questions about what precisely Clark had intended by inviting her out for dinner had now been answered. The restaurant itself had given her a very large clue: there was no other word for the ambience it created apart from 'romantic'. Now Clark was staring into her eyes, holding her hand and telling her seriously that he was glad they had met. Clark was clearly following through on his statement of several evenings earlier when he had told her he found her attractive. But he was also making clear that his feelings went beyond the merely sexual; whatever it was he was looking for, it was not a brief, meaningless affair.

< But what do I want?> Lois asked herself doubtfully. < Am I ready for a relationship? And do I want one with Clark?>

< Yes> her heart told her. < This man is special - you cannot let him get away. You and he are meant to be together>

< But am I ready?> she asked herself. < And how do I know it will work?>

< You just have to trust> her heart said. Lois groaned silently; trust was something which had never come easily to her. And yet... Clark Kent had shown that he could be trusted, more so than she herself had. After all, it was only that morning that she had been planning to use Clark to discover Superman's secrets. Trust someone? Trust her emotions? That was impossible, Lois felt.

She realised that Clark was still watching her closely. "I'm glad I came back too," she assured him. She paused, frowned, and added, "It's weird, you know. I told you how I found out who I was - those French missionaries who found me?" He nodded. "Well, it's been bugging me since.... One of them looked really odd, out of place. He was older than the others, and kinda... well, he almost looked as if he was wearing fancy dress. He was small, and had an old-fashioned moustache and glasses, and he wore a tweed three-piece suit." Remembering the dapper little man, Lois reflected that he really hadn't looked at all like his companions, and in fact didn't look French.

Clark sat up straight at Lois's description: the man she described sounded exactly like his strange visitor of more than eighteen months ago, the man who had presented him with his Superman costume. But how could it be? He was about to relate his own encounter with the man to Lois, then realised that he couldn't do it without explaining the purpose of the man's visit. And *that* was impossible.

So he changed the subject, releasing Lois's hand and gesturing towards the menu. "I think we should get ready to order, Lois."

"So, Nigel, perhaps you would like to explain to me precisely how the idiot you hired failed to eliminate those nosey reporters." Lex Luthor did not appear to be a happy man, Nigel St John was aware; he wasn't entirely surprised, for he had been equally angry to discover that the small-time criminal he had paid handsomely for what should have been less than five minutes' work had not only botched the entire operation, but had himself ended up under a police guard in Metropolis General.

"I was extremely disappointed myself, sir," St John replied smoothly. "I understand that Clark Kent appeared to become aware that the car was headed directly towards them, and he managed to get himself and Ms Lane out of the way. And then, for some reason, the car's rear tyres blew out, and the driver crashed."

"Mr Kent appears to be an extremely resourceful individual," Luthor replied pensively. "He is following the Mayoral campaign for the Daily Planet, isn't he?"

"Yes," St John confirmed. "And I understand from my contact on Leeson's staff that Kent has been asking questions about my role in the campaign."

"Indeed?" Luthor appeared taken aback at this piece of information.

"As far as I am aware, he does not as yet know my identity," St John continued.

"And even if he knew your name, or discovered that you are in my employ, there is nothing particularly incriminating about that," Luthor added reflectively. "There is nothing unusual about a wealthy businessman supporting a politician's re-election campaign, and Leeson has already declared my generous donation." Luthor strolled across the penthouse office, coming to a halt by his large desk. He sifted through the messages resting on the blotter, clearly deep in thought.

"All the same, this Kent appears to be rather more of a nuisance than we originally thought," Luthor commented after a few moments. "He is aware that the Lane woman's life may be at risk, and now I discover that his interest in the election campaign goes deeper than I had realised." He selected a cigar from the walnut box on the desk, and busied himself in clipping the end of it. Throwing St John a hard stare suddenly, the head of LexCorp added, "The fact that Kent appears to be working with Lane makes the two of them even more troublesome. It appears that my decision to have both of them eliminated was right."

"It was indeed, sir," St John agreed, stroking his wispy beard.

"Then why has it not been achieved?" Luthor's voice struck like a whiplash.

St John shook his head slowly. "I am endeavouring to discover, through my sources in the police, exactly what caused the car to crash; it does seem rather strange that two tyres should burst at the same instant. As for Lane and Kent's escape, it seems to be an unfortunate accident that Kent was alert enough to get them out of the way."

"And the driver? Can he identify you?" To anyone familiar with Lex Luthor's moods, his tone of voice would have indicated his extreme displeasure.

St John, however, permitted himself a slight smile. "The business was undertaken through an intermediary, who will not talk. As for our driver, I managed to gain access to his hospital bed earlier and made some slight, ah, *adjustments* to his drip. He is probably dead by now."

"Good." Luthor sounded partially mollified. "I trust that you will succeed next time - or would you prefer that I give Asabi the task of eliminating our opponents?"

"That will not be necessary, sir," Nigel drawled smoothly.

Luthor recommenced flicking through the messages on his desk, coming to an abrupt halt as he noticed one in particular. "Well, well, well," he murmured softly.

"Something interesting, sir?" St John enquired.

Luthor turned to face his personal assistant. "Yes, very. It seems that Ms Lane called this afternoon, most insistent upon arranging a personal interview with me for her paper."

"On what subject?"

"Apparently, my business interests and political affiliations," Luthor replied thoughtfully. "This could be... very interesting."

"You are considering seeing her?" St John seemed surprised.

Luthor made a ceremony of lighting his cigar and blowing the first cloud of blue smoke before replying. "I think so. Yes. It would afford a unique opportunity of discovering exactly what Ms Lane and Mr Kent think they know about me." He paused. "Knowledge is power, Nigel. Know thine enemy."

They had ordered, and Clark was searching for a more neutral topic of conversation. He hadn't failed to notice the wary expression in Lois's eyes when he had told her that he was glad she had come back to Metropolis, and yet again he warned himself that he would have to tread very carefully if he wasn't going to scare her off. Pinning a friendly smile on his face, he asked casually, "So have you been in touch with many of your friends since you got back?"

The question took Lois by surprise, and she took a moment or two to think about it, which caused Clark another moment of concern: had he somehow put his foot in it? He realised that his alarm must have registered on his face, for Lois reached her hand across to touch his arm lightly in reassurance. "It's okay - you haven't said anything wrong. I was just... thinking...." She trailed off, and again Clark wondered what was wrong. He remained silent, however, allowing Lois the choice of whether to explain.

She frowned then, and raised her eyes to meet his. "When you asked about friends, I just remembered how I felt when I was on my way back to America, after I'd remembered who I was. The Embassy officer who'd arranged my passport had taken me to the airport, and he said that he guessed my family and friends would be really glad to know I was alive after all." She paused, remembering that day, only a few short weeks before.

"Well, I was on the plane and I was thinking about who I was going to call first. Perry already knew - I'd called him from the embassy, and Mom and Dad too. I knew they'd have told Lucy. Anyway, I started trying to list off the friends I'd get together with for a celebration, and I realised that just about the only people I could think of were from the Planet." She paused again, lowering her gaze to the table and beginning to fiddle with her cutlery.

"Work colleagues, you mean?" Clark asked.

"I guess so," she confirmed. "Jimmy, maybe one or two others."

"But what about school-friends, people from college?" Clark was

amazed. How could anyone not have a long list of friends from various phases in their life?

Lois shrugged. "I guess you keep in touch with all your college friends, right?"

"Pretty much," Clark agreed. "We don't get together all that much, but we call each other from time to time. And I still have a few friends from growing up in Smallville."

< You would> thought Lois. < That's the kind of person you are....> She raised her gaze to his face again, seeing only concern and compassion in his expression. "I guess I was always too busy getting good grades, being competitive... I didn't really notice whether I had many friends. Then after graduation - well, I never really kept in touch with anyone, and I guess they didn't bother keeping in touch with me."

Trying not to reveal the surprise and pity he felt, Clark shrugged lightly. "But you have other friends who care about you. I know how much you mean to Perry and Jimmy."

"Yes, true," Lois agreed. "You see, Perry's really been like a father to me, and Jimmy... well, I guess like a younger brother." She glanced down at her hands again, reflecting on her real family. Her parents, and Lucy, had been there to meet her when she had arrived back in Metropolis, but they had not stayed around for very long. Her parents were on the verge of splitting up after yet another attempt to make their disastrous marriage work, and Lucy had needed to get back to her boyfriend and job in San Francisco. They spoke on the telephone, but none of the Lanes were particularly close. Lois and Lucy appeared to have grown apart again since Lucy had lived with Lois while the younger sibling had been at college. It was probably her own fault, Lois reflected; she had been rather disapproving of one or two of the men in Lucy's life, which hadn't earned her any brownie points. Lucy had seemed only too glad to get her own place in the end.

"Tell me about your family," Clark invited. "I envy you, having a sister - and your parents, too."

< You wouldn't if you knew what growing up in my family was like> Lois thought bitterly, then instantly castigated herself for her insensitivity. Clark, after all, was an only child, and he had lost his parents when he'd been only a child.

She sighed, and met his gaze. "The truth, Clark?" He nodded. "My family was a battlezone. The whole time Lucy and I were growing up, my parents argued. My father was having affairs, and my mother was drinking herself into a stupor. Lucy and I grew up barely seeing our father because he was either working or out with his latest fling, and we learnt early on how to coax an unwilling alcoholic into bed, and to recognise the smell of whisky or vodka on her breath."

Clark listened, shocked, to the scenario Lois was relating. She wasn't exaggerating, he could tell; her tone was too flat, too deadened for that. He had gathered, from something Jimmy had said, that Lois was not close to her family, but he had never imagined anything like this.

Lois studied Clark, wondering how he was taking her depiction of life within the Lane household. She could tell that he was taken aback, but his expression was encouraging, inviting her to tell him more. And suddenly, for the first time in her life, she felt that here was someone she **could** talk to about her family. Somehow, it seemed to her that, just as Clark had understood her feelings about the Congo investigation, he would understand the scars she had carried inside her for more years than she cared to remember.

They were interrupted by the arrival of their pasta, and a few minutes were spent exchanging idle commentary on the high quality of the food. As they finished eating and waited for their plates to be cleared, Clark raised the subject again.

"Lois - it sounds like you had a pretty horrible childhood. I can't tell you how sorry I am about that."

She gave him a wry smile. "I guess it shouldn't matter to me now - but somehow it still does sometimes. Still, it's probably not that unusual. Most marriages don't last these days, and kids get brought up in broken homes or get caught in the cross-fire between couples who don't get along."

Clark was aghast. "Lois, that's a very cynical view of life and marriage."

She shrugged. "Is it? I'd call it realistic, myself. Okay, your parents were still together when they died, but... I don't mean to be insensitive, but if they'd lived would they still be married to each other today?"

It was Clark's turn to dip his head and lower his gaze to the table. Pictures of Jonathan and Martha Kent, as they had been almost twenty years ago, swept into his mind; he still missed them, even after so many years. He blinked, adjusted his glasses and raised his head to face Lois again.

"Yes, I think they would," he replied softly. "Mom and Dad had a really special love for each other. I know you might say I'm too young to remember, but I have the letters they wrote to each other, while Mom was away at college and even when they were married. They are just... so beautiful. I just hope that... maybe one day I might love someone as much as my dad loved Mom."

"Then they were lucky," Lois replied curtly. Even this man, who had lost his parents so young, had experienced a happier childhood than she had. Or had he? He had never told her what his life had been like after his parents' death, other than that he had moved through a succession of foster homes. She shook her head and reached across the table for Clark's hand. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

He turned his palm over and curled his fingers around hers. "It's okay. I understand." Lois met his eyes, and somehow realised that he did.

Steadying her voice, she spoke again. "The other thing I found hard was that my father always hated that I wasn't a boy. He really wanted a son, and as I was the first-born, he was expecting me to be a boy. He even had names picked out.... That's how I only have one first name - they didn't know what to call me, so I got named after Mom's

great-aunt." She swallowed. "So you see, I grew up always knowing that I was a disappointment to him. And no matter what I did, I continued to be a disappointment."

"That can't be true, Lois," Clark protested. "He must have loved you for who you are, who you turned out to be." But Lois shook her head.

"It was always the same. I would work my... my *socks* off, and it was never good enough. I remember getting 98% on a test at school once, and I knew all the other kids' parents would have been really excited, but my dad... you know what he said?" She raised eyes bright with unshed tears to Clark. "That leaves two points for improvement, Lois. That's what he said. So now you see why I say nothing was ever good enough?" She fell silent again, remembering the years of trying hard, continually striving to earn her father's approval, only to understand, finally, when she had won her first journalism award, that she would never succeed.

"So is that why you always drive yourself so hard?" Clark asked after a pause. He had been stunned by Lois's revelations; he simply could not imagine that a parent could do that to their child.

Surprised again at his perspicacity, Lois nodded. "I guess that's what started it, at any rate. Then I started to do it for myself. It mattered to *me* to be the best."

"But you were still trying to prove something to him?" Clark prompted.

"Yes... I guess," Lois admitted. "I suppose maybe I had a daydream, a fantasy - one of these years I would win a Pulitzer Prize, and I would wait for him to come and congratulate me, and I would tell him that I did it in spite of him, to prove that I wasn't the worthless female he always made me think I was."

Stroking the back of her hand with his fingers, Clark held her gaze with his, deep brown eyes staring into lighter brown pools. "You are *not* worthless, Lois. You are brilliant, intelligent, and a caring, compassionate human being. And, for what it's worth, I think you're incredibly special."

Lois felt a warm sensation begin to uncurl itself in her stomach. For the first time in her life, someone appreciated her for herself; oh, Perry had always made it clear that he valued her and thought highly of her as a journalist, and she knew that Jimmy would always be there for her as a friend. But the way Clark was speaking to her, looking at her.... Here was someone who, regardless of whatever else they might become to each other, would be a true friend.

She blinked, unsure how to deal with the atmosphere between them which had suddenly become highly charged. Desperate for anything to break the mood, she reached for the dessert menu and said, in an over-bright tone, that she hoped they had chocolate cake because she could die for chocolate....

Clark, sensing that the exchange of confidences had made Lois suddenly apprehensive, took up the change of subject.

Later, they walked back to Lois's apartment. On exiting the

restaurant, Clark had offered Lois his arm, with a casual quip about his deep-seated need to continue the gentleman act. She had accepted it with simple grace, and stayed close to him as they walked.

After spending the first few minutes in companionable silence, Lois glanced up at Clark. "Well, you heard all about my childhood this evening, so how about you? What were things like for you after your parents were killed?"

Clark hesitated and sighed. Those years were a part of his life he tried not to think about too much; not that the period had been particularly painful, but he had been going through adolescence - a difficult period for any teenage boy, but far more so in his case, since he had gradually been discovering powers he hadn't expected to have, despite Jor-El's remarks which Clark had listened to a number of times. It would all have been so much easier had Jonathan and Martha been alive. But he had been alone, and always had needed to take great care to ensure that no-one found out about his powers. No-one, that was, except Lana.

Lana had been one of his closest friends at school when he'd been fourteen; they weren't officially boyfriend and girlfriend, although it had been widely assumed that that had been the case. They spent most of their free time together, which Clark enjoyed because it meant that he could hang out at the Lang place rather than in his current foster-home, which hadn't been a very welcoming place. At that age, his Super-hearing was well developed and his Super-vision had been making itself all too apparent, much to his embarrassment and discomfiture on several occasions when he had suddenly found himself looking through walls and seeing sights he would rather have avoided. Lana had come upon him on one of those occasions, and he had felt so awkward at what he had just witnessed - two of the town's older teenagers making out in the garage belonging to the parents of one of them - that he had suddenly found himself telling her all about his powers, and being from another planet. At first she had been sceptical, then amazed, and finally alarmed, telling him he must never tell another person the truth about himself.

Lois nudged him, recalling him to the present; he turned to look at her. He certainly could not tell her any of what had really happened while he had been growing up, he thought. < But why not? > a little voice asked. It was Lana who had always been so concerned about keeping his Kryptonian origins and Super-powers a secret. He was alone in the world, and well able to look after himself. What would it matter if the world knew that Clark Kent was Superman?

He sighed; it would matter. He would have no privacy, and Clark valued his privacy. Perhaps some day, if his dreams came true and he and Lois were together in the way he imagined, he would be able to tell her, but for now....

"Clark? Is something wrong? Shouldn't I have asked about your foster-homes?" Lois was concerned.

He shook his head. "Sorry, I was just... remembering.... It wasn't too bad really, I guess. I had four different homes, up until I was eighteen, so I got moved around a bit. Most of them were okay, but I guess after being an only child I felt like a bit of an afterthought some of the time." He paused. "Then I went away to college, and worked on the Smallville Post in the vacation - and then moved away

altogether when I started to travel the world."

"But you and Lana stayed together?" Lois prompted, wondering what it had been about this woman from a small country town which had kept Clark Kent faithful all those years.

"Yes, I guess - we didn't see each other a lot, because I was pretty far away," Clark replied. < I could have seen a lot more of her if she hadn't objected to me using my Super-powers> he remembered. "Then I moved to Metropolis, and she got a job here too and came to join me - that's when we got engaged. But as you already know, it didn't work out."

"Yeah," Lois murmured, wondering whether it was selfish to feel glad.

They arrived at her apartment block a few minutes later, and without any prompting or questioning Clark accompanied her inside. Lois wondered what he was expecting from her: was he simply expecting to be offered coffee, or did he assume that more would be on the agenda? Since this appeared to have been a date, did he imagine that he would be staying the night?

And, more to the point, what did she want to happen?

Lying in her bed later that night, Lois reflected on the evening: despite having been forced to confront things she normally preferred to forget, she couldn't remember when she had last enjoyed an evening so much. It wasn't just that Clark was good company, or that he seemed to understand and empathise with her feelings about her family. He was also an extremely attractive man; she hadn't failed to notice the admiring looks he had received from a couple of the restaurant's other female patrons, or the jealous glances aimed at herself.

Still, she had prepared herself for the pass which she'd felt was inevitable as soon as he got inside her apartment. He had, as she had suspected he would, come up with an excuse to come inside with her: as they had climbed the stairs he had said he wanted to talk to Henderson again before leaving Lois on her own. Lois, who had decided to invite him in for coffee - and perhaps a kiss or two - anyway, had agreed. However, he had surprised her by declining coffee and immediately making his phone call. It had been a brief conversation, and Lois had been able to follow little or nothing from Clark's end of the dialogue. When he had hung up, he had simply explained that the detective had been unable to interview the driver due to the latter's injuries, and that Henderson hoped to be able to talk to him in the morning.

Clark had then shown some concern about the security arrangements: he checked the location of the panic button, and Henderson had told him there would be additional foot patrols in the vicinity of the apartment block. Clark had then insisted that he would also contact Superman, who would, Clark was sure, keep an ear out for any trouble.

Then, to her amazement, he had smiled at her and said, "Goodnight,

Lois, sleep well."

Astounded, she had accompanied him to the door.

He had paused in the doorway, and his hand had crept up to caress her face and hair. His mouth had lowered slowly, and brushed over hers in the lightest of caresses. She had stretched up to deepen the kiss, but he had already been pulling back.

"Clark?" she had protested, disappointed and surprised.

He had smiled, a sweet, affectionate curve of his eminently kissable lips. Then he had released his grip on the door to pull her gently against him; his mouth had lowered again and claimed hers in a deeper, more passionate embrace. Lois had opened her mouth under his, wrapped her arms about him, welcoming this invasion of her senses.

Without warning, he had released her and stepped back. "See you tomorrow, Lois," he had murmured before stepping out into the hall.

"You... you tease," she had muttered as she had closed the door behind him. What did he think he was doing to her? She was all wound up, thanks to him. What did he want from her?

Clark was smiling as he carried out his night-time patrol of Metropolis. So Lois thought he was teasing her, did she? Well, it looked as if she was as attracted to him as he was to her. That was good, wasn't it?

Fine, except for the usual problem - Superman.

Well, maybe they could deal with that, he thought. After all, it had seemed as if she was beginning to understand Superman a bit better after his visit to her after the Chicago explosion. Still, it probably wasn't the right time yet to tell her about his other identity. *That* would have to wait, until he was sure that she could accept it.

Unable to sleep, Lois threw back the covers and padded out to her sitting-room. Switching on her desk-lamp, she booted up the lap-top and called up her Superman article and re-read what she had so far written. She made a few adjustments to the text, and then deleted the notes she had made at the end about a possible secret identity. She still suspected that something of the kind might be true; but on reflection she had decided that little would be gained by printing that kind of speculation.

She had, much to her surprise, found herself thinking about Superman while tossing and turning in bed; it had been one way of taking her mind off Clark Kent and wondering just what their relationship was. She finally admitted to herself that she had been quite wrong about Superman; whatever else his motives were, he certainly didn't do what he did out of any egotistical motives. He did fulfil a useful role, one the police and other emergency services could not do, and it

seemed that the city had been better in a number of ways since he had arrived. It wasn't just the good he actually managed to achieve, Lois had realised. Of course, there were times when he wasn't able to help, or when he couldn't be in two places at once. But the mere *idea* of Superman appeared to make a difference to people in the city. It was what Superman stood for: honesty, justice, fairness; it was the idea of a real hero as opposed to a two-dimensional comic-book or Hollywood hero; it was the knowledge that someone with such strength and amazing powers should choose to use them for good rather than to dominate.

Returning to the start of her article, Lois pulled her thoughts together and began to type. An hour later, tired but satisfied, she emailed the article to the Planet, for the attention of Perry White.

"I finished my Superman article last night," Lois ventured to Clark as they strolled together to the Planet offices.

"You did?" The glance Clark shot Lois was wary.

"Yeah. Oh, don't worry, it's nothing like the kind of piece I imagined I was going to write. It's certainly not an expose, believe me." No, it certainly wasn't, Lois mused. Although that was what she had set out to do, she had been convinced that the truth did not merit a Lane hatchet-job.

Clark was surprised. Although he had suspected that Lois had changed her opinion of Superman to a degree, he had still expected a critical piece to end up on Perry White's desk. However, he tried to hide the extent of his curiosity, simply asking, "So what did you say, then?"

Lois stopped walking, and faced him. "Well, I found out a few things about Superman, Clark. I didn't tell you, but he came to see me the night of that awful explosion...." At Clark's nod, she asked, "He told you?"

"Yeah - remember I told you he came to wash his suit? When he gave me the interview?" Lois nodded. "Well, I didn't mention anything about it then because you said nothing. But...." Clark paused, wondering just how much to reveal, then decided Lois deserved to know. "He said that you had helped him enormously, giving him a chance to talk about what happened."

Lois searched Clark's face, surprised. "I asked him whether he had anyone to talk to... but he has you, surely?"

Clark shrugged. "Not always - and anyway, maybe I'm just not a good listener."

Lois snorted. "No way! I have never talked about myself so much as I have since I met you. And you make me feel... as if... as if you understand," she finished on little more than a whisper.

Clark's eyes widened at this insight into Lois's feelings. However, she clearly had no intention of continuing the subject, since she switched back to the topic of Superman. "Anyway, I realised last

night that the most important thing about Superman is his status as someone for people to look up to. It just doesn't matter if he can't always get there in time; the *idea* of Superman makes a difference to us all." She continued to explain to Clark the ideas which had come to her in the middle of the night, gesticulating animatedly as she did so.

Clark, meanwhile, was listening in amazement. He was aware that people in Metropolis admired him and respected him, but he had never quite seen it in that light before. And yet Lois was right. The fact that Superman existed gave hope to everyone. Sure, perhaps it made the odd police officer lazy, secure in the knowledge that Superman would help out in an emergency. But the inspiration and hope which could be drawn from the activities of Metropolis's resident Super-hero did, as Lois pointed out, make a difference to ordinary people's lives. And so it really didn't matter if he couldn't always help everyone; he now realised that the doubts and regrets which taunted him on many nights when he had failed to save someone, or prevent someone from being injured, really were not important. He did what he could, and people were grateful for it.

Lois studied Clark in puzzlement; he seemed to be in another world. She had spoken to him twice and he had failed to answer. Thumping him lightly on his arm, she asked, "You still on this planet?"

Belatedly reawakening to reality, Clark shook himself and smiled at Lois. "Sure. I was just thinking... but it doesn't matter. Let's get to work and find out whether Luthor is going to agree to see us."

"I was right!" Lois came running over to Clark's desk, carrying a small scrap of paper of the type on which Planet messages tended to be written. "This is from Luthor's secretary - he'll see us at 11 this morning."

Clark glanced at his watch; it was 9.30. "That's great, Lois - that gives us time to go over a few questions first." He was pleased; he would finally get an opportunity to see Luthor face to face. There were a number of questions Clark wanted to ask the third-richest man in the world; there were even more questions Superman would like to ask Luthor, but Clark would have to do without those, he reasoned.

He had received some news as well, which had made him even more concerned about the attempts on Lois's life. Henderson had phoned shortly before to tell Clark that the driver of the hit-and-run vehicle had been found dead in his hospital bed the previous evening - apparently air had got into his drip. Clark, already suspicious, had asked how likely this was to have been accidental, and was not reassured to have his suspicions confirmed. The police were treating the death as murder.

Shortly before the appointed time, the duo climbed out of a cab outside the headquarters of LexCorp and announced themselves at the reception desk. To Lois's annoyance, they were left to cool their heels in the lobby for nearly fifteen minutes before a dapper little man, of Indian origin judging by his dress and turban, arrived to

escort them up to Luthor's office.

As they were shown into Luthor's penthouse office, Lois glanced around in amazement. She had certainly expected something plush, but this... and it must have been the tallest building in Metropolis by far. Luthor, who had been seated at a large desk in front of the big picture window, got to his feet as they approached.

"Ms Lane, Mr Kent... a pleasure to meet you at last! I'm a great fan of your work," Luthor announced smoothly, offering his hand to each in turn. Lois accepted it with a bright smile and a murmur of greeting; Clark took Luthor's hand with rather more reluctance and resisted the temptation to respond to the head of LexCorp greeting with a crushing grip.

Luthor ordered coffee, and smoothly directed the two reporters to an area where a coffee-table was surrounded by large sofas. Clark recognised the tactics immediately: Luthor was trying to control the interview. He smiled humourlessly to himself: he would not fall for that, and he was fairly sure Lois wouldn't either. This, of course, was their first interview as a team; he didn't count the ex-con they had spoken to two days ago. It would be interesting to watch Lois in action.

And Lois moved into competent-reporter mode almost immediately, along the lines they had rehearsed. With a very friendly smile, she thanked Luthor for making time to see them in his busy schedule; he smiled urbanely in response and commented that one of his appointments had been cancelled and so it had been easy to offer them the interview. Clark simply sat back and watched the byplay for a several minutes; this had been the plan they had agreed in any case, but he wanted to observe Luthor while the man's attention was on someone else - in this case, Lois.

Clark had seen Luthor in action before, usually at press conferences or other public events; the man exuded charm, although there was certainly the hint of a hard-as-nails attitude underneath the superficial exterior. He had expected that Luthor would not easily betray himself, and this proved to be the case; the billionaire provided smoothly-spoken responses to questions about his origins, his early business activities and his political affiliations.

Clark took over questioning in relation to Luthor's support for Mayor Leeson, as the reporter covering the election for the Planet; again Luthor seemed perfectly comfortable arguing that he felt Mayor Leeson had done a good job for the city and for business, and deserved a second term. Then Lois slipped in the question they had rehearsed.

Hoping to catch Luthor off guard, she observed artlessly, "Didn't Leeson used to work for a former business associate of yours - John Brentford?"

Clark watched Luthor closely but surreptitiously; the man's pulse rate accelerated only very slightly as he replied carelessly, "Did she? I didn't know Brentford all that well personally, although our companies certainly had business dealings."

Clark grimaced inwardly; either the man was a highly accomplished liar without a shred of fear, or he was telling the truth.

Personally, Clark inclined to the former, but it wasn't something he was likely to be able to prove. He frowned slightly then as he noticed Luthor try a new tactic. Although both Lois and Clark were now asking questions, Luthor was addressing his replies to Lois, giving her charming smiles as he did so. < He must be mad if he thinks Lois is an empty-headed female who can be distracted by a little bit of flattery> Clark thought, though it didn't stop him feeling annoyed at Luthor's behaviour.

Further questions relating to the Mayoral campaign, including the presence of Nigel St John on Leeson's staff, elicited no very useful responses, and after an hour and a half the two reporters had to bring the interview to an end. Luthor escorted them to the door of the penthouse office, shaking Clark's hand and raising Lois's to his lips.

"Delighted to meet you both.... Miss Lane, it's been a particular pleasure to talk to you."

Back outside, as Lois glanced around and then whistled for a cab, Clark shoved his hands deep into his pockets and observed, "That was a waste of time."

Lois glanced back at him as she climbed into the taxi. "Oh, I don't know, Clark - sure, he's a clever son of a.... But I think we can safely assume he's not all above board. He's definitely up to something with Leeson."

"What makes you say that?" Clark asked, interested that Lois had also reached the same conclusion as he had; she certainly had not had the advantage of super-powers with which to do so.

She shrugged. "Call it intuition if you like.... I'm just positive he wasn't telling the truth about knowing Brentford, or about how well he knows Leeson."

"Yeah, me too - but we've got nothing to prove it," Clark pointed out.

"And that's out next task," Lois reminded him sharply. "No-one ever said this was going to be easy, Kent."

He didn't reply; instead, on a sudden impulse he reached across and caught Lois's chin in his hand, then brought his mouth to hers in a brief but firm kiss. She stared at him as he drew away. "What was that all about, Kent?"

He grimaced. "Sorry. But I didn't like the way Luthor was flirting with you."

She glared at him. "Did you think I was encouraging him or something? You don't own me, Clark Kent!"

He raised his hands, palm upwards, in a gesture of conciliation. "I never presumed I did. And no, I wasn't suggesting you encouraged him - other than smile nicely occasionally in an attempt to draw him out."

"He wasn't interested in me, for heaven's sake, Clark!" Lois commented impatiently. "It was all a tactic - charm me enough and

I'll swallow every word he says. I've seen it all before, you know, and the easiest way to get the better of someone who tries it is to pretend that it's working - lull them into a false sense of security. Flatter them in return." She gave him a direct stare which made it plain that she felt she knew what she was doing. "Let him think I responded to his charm."

Clark knew that what she was saying made sense, but he still felt uneasy. He wasn't sure to what extent his feelings were simple jealousy, or genuine concern that their visit to Luthor might actually have alerted the billionaire businessman to the fact that the Planet reporters were onto him. And if that was the case, might not Luthor increase his efforts to kill Lois?

Lois fell silent as well, as she tried to work out precisely what Clark's kiss meant. Was he actually *jealous* of Luthor's interest in her? And if so, what did that suggest about his feelings for her? Or, more to the point, what did it say about how he viewed their relationship? Did he think that because they had kissed a couple of times, because they had gone out for a meal together last night - which she was pretty sure he'd considered a date - that they were now an *item*? Was his behaviour actually possessiveness rather than jealousy - and if so, was she prepared to put up with that?

Lois gritted her teeth. She'd never yet allowed a man to treat her as a possession, and no matter how attractive Clark Kent was, she had no intention of starting now!

"Well, sir? Did you learn anything?" Nigel St John enquired, joining his employer a few minutes after Lane and Kent had departed.

Luthor swung around to face his personal assistant, his expression forbidding. "I did indeed. Those two reporters are onto you - they know you work for me, and I am very sure that they weren't satisfied with my explanation that you were simply advising the Mayor on strategy in dealing with business interests."

St John looked thoughtful for a few moments. "In that case, sir, I will endeavour to finish matters this afternoon."

"You do that, Nigel." Luthor's tone was as sharp as a whiplash. "And I am giving you fair warning that if you fail again you will suffer the consequences." The head of LexCorp turned on his heel and marched towards the door of his office, leaving a seethingly-angry St John behind him.

"Well, something else did come out of this morning, Clark," Lois observed later as she checked her email back at the Planet.

"It did?" Clark strolled over to lean against the edge of her desk, favouring her with the smile she had already come to love. His brown eyes regarded her warmly, making her wish that they weren't in the middle of the bullpen at the Planet, surrounded by other journalists, all of whom were avid gossips. When he looked at her like that, it was very difficult to remember her fears about his attitude towards her; it was so tempting just to lean back in her chair and bask in

his caressing smile.

"Sure," she replied, smiling back at him. "It's no use in relation to our investigation, but we did get the first in-depth Lex Luthor interview. This won't be like the usual puff pieces put together from PR handouts." She shrugged. "I know it's not what either of us wants to write in relation to Luthor, but it is an exclusive after all, and it'll keep Perry happy."

Clark shrugged; she was right, he realised. Although he really wanted to make more progress on getting to the bottom of the Leeson-Brentford-Luthor triangle, he had to admit that at present they were stymied. He hadn't been able to think of any other possible angles, and of course it was perfectly possible that in writing up their notes into a halfway-decent profile something could occur to them.

It was actually the first piece that Clark had co-authored with Lois, and he found it an extremely challenging and enjoyable experience. They bounced ideas off each other, and discovered that in some respects their working methods were very complementary. Two hours later the profile was ready to be sent to Perry for approval.

As Clark was returning to Lois's desk bearing a couple of takeaway double chocolate mochas from the coffee bar next to the Planet, Perry emerged from his office. "Nice work, you two!"

Lois swung around in her seat, a smile on her face which, if Clark had known her a little longer, would have aroused his suspicions. "You like the Luthor piece, Chief?"

"Sure - okay, there's nothing particularly hard-hitting about it, but it *is* an exclusive interview with the man himself. Now I've just been onto Advertising, and we're running extra radio and TV ads over the next couple of days on the strength of that interview and your Superman piece, Lois - we'll run them both in the Saturday edition. Lois Lane is back at the Planet with a vengeance - that'll knock spots off the competition."

"Lois's Superman piece?" Clark enquired innocently. He knew, of course, that Lois had finished it - she had told him herself. But he hadn't realised she had already sent it to Perry - he'd been hoping to persuade her to let him take a look at it first. Just so he could be prepared for any little surprises she'd decided to include.

"Yeah - that's good as well, Lois. Looks like you're back to your old self," the editor observed gruffly. "Mind you, I notice you toned down your approach from that hard line you were taking last week in conference. You sounded as if Superman was some crooked Congressman you were going after!"

So she really didn't do a hatchet job after all, Clark thought with some sense of relief; although he admitted to himself that after their conversation on the way to work that morning he hadn't really thought she would write anything very critical. He was still anxious to see precisely what she *had* written, however; Lois had never been known for Hello-style features. The profile would be hard-hitting in some respects, he felt sure. He determined to try to sneak into the Chief's office later and take a look at it.

Lois, meanwhile, snagged her coffee from Clark's hand and began to sip it, while filling in their editor on an additional few details of the Luthor interview. Clark, watching her, frowned slightly: there was something not quite... *right* about her manner. It was as if she was excited about something, but was determined not to reveal whatever it was.... But what would Lois be excited about? If it was work, he considered, surely she would tell him: they were partners, after all. If it was personal, then perhaps it was different: he was aware that he still had some way to go before she accepted him as part of her life in *that* way. He had made progress - their date last night had been... wonderful. She had confided in him in a way she clearly had not done with anyone else before, and her attitude to what she clearly considered his premature departure from her apartment had given him further hope.

Clark had been aware that Lois had expected him to make a move on her the previous evening; she had expected that he would probably try to get her into bed, he was sure. But there were a few things Lois Lane still didn't know about Clark Kent - apart from the obvious, he thought with a secretive smile. First, he never liked to live up entirely to people's expectations of him; it did no harm to surprise people every now and then. Second, he had never been interested in casual sex, preferring to consolidate a relationship before moving on to that degree of intimacy... which was no doubt why he was one of the least sexually experienced guys in Metropolis, he thought wryly. That one time with Lana... well, he wished that had never happened. He had been so nervous to begin with, but knowing that she hated his Super-powers had kept him on his guard the whole time to ensure that he didn't do anything a normal man might not have done. So, while he had enjoyed the experience in some respects, he hadn't exactly... had the same reaction that any other man would have been expected to have in the circumstances. Lana had not been happy, and had accused him of not finding her attractive - *that* had led to yet another argument.

So for all sorts of reasons Clark wasn't interested in pushing a sexual relationship with Lois at this stage; but he had also gathered, from his own observations and things he'd gleaned from Jimmy, that she had had some bad experiences with men and wasn't likely to trust easily. He wanted to show her that she could trust him.

Recalling himself to the present, he glanced across at Lois again; she had ended her conversation with Perry and the editor had returned to his office. Yes, there was definitely something up; she kept stealing glances at the newsroom clock, and - yes, now she was starting to sidle away from her desk. He caught her eye; there was definitely a flash of guilt, before she assumed an innocent expression and announced that she needed to visit the ladies' room.

Oh yeah? Clark thought, casually pulling a piece of paper across his desk and pretending to commence writing some notes. He followed Lois's progress across the newsroom by surreptitiously pulling his glasses down a little and watching her reflection in the brass rail beside his desk. As he'd suspected, just before she reached the bathrooms she darted into the stairwell. He quickly got to his feet and strolled to her desk; he had quickly become familiar with Lois's habit of scribbling brief notes of any phone calls or upcoming

meetings on her pad.

Yes, there it was - N S-J, 2.30

Now, if Clark was interpreting the 'code' correctly, it looked like she was meeting Nigel St John at 2.30pm. Which was... two minutes away. But where? The brief note gave no indication. And why the *hell* was she meeting St John on her own anyway? She *knew* how dangerous he was! He had tried to kill her at least twice - probably three times, if he'd been behind the apparent hit and run the previous evening.

Clark headed for the stairwell, his Super-hearing on full alert as he rushed through the door.

Lois glanced at her watch again as she exited from the stairwell and stepped out onto the Planet roof. St John had said two-thirty, and it was that now. She had wondered how he was going to get onto the roof; as far as she was aware the only way up there was through the internal stairwell, and she couldn't quite imagine Nigel St John using the front entrance of the Planet building.

It had been quite a shock to receive that phone call from him while Clark had been out getting coffees; quite fortuitous as well, as it happened. St John had told her that he was fed up with taking orders from Lex Luthor, and that he intended to go to the police and offer to testify about Luthor's involvement in a number of things, including gun-running to the Congo. *That* had certainly got Lois's interest

St John had said that he wanted to tell his side of the story to a newspaper before going to the police, since it was quite possible that he wouldn't be able to do so afterwards. And because of her interest in Luthor's dealings, he had chosen Lois Lane. Interestingly, Clark Kent hadn't been mentioned, and Lois had gained the clear impression that St John wanted her to come alone.

Well, of course it could be a trap! she acknowledged impatiently as an inner voice chastised her for being foolish enough to keep the appointment. Nigel St John had tried to kill her: why would he suddenly want to give her an award-winning exclusive? This would more than likely be another attempt on her life.

So why hadn't she been sensible and called the police?

Because if there had been even the slightest hint of a police presence anywhere near, St John wouldn't show up.

Why hadn't she at least told Clark? her inner voice demanded incredulously.

Because he wouldn't have let her go. He would have insisted on calling the police, or even turning up himself. Then he'd get the exclusive instead... *he* might get killed.

For about the fourth time, Lois glanced back at the stairwell door, tempted to run back inside and grab the nearest phone. Then a noise attracted her attention; a footstep. A man stepped out from behind

one of the columns on the roof. A man with silvery-white hair and a wispy beard.

"Miss Lane? So good of you to come. I must confess that I had expected to be stood up," Nigel St John drawled.

Lois faced him, deliberately remaining close to the door to ensure that St John wouldn't be able to block off her exit. She was not remotely surprised when he produced a gun from his inside jacket pocket.

"Oh, a gun," she drawled back at him. "I think I would have expected something a little more original from a former spy."

"Oh, you've been investigating my background, have you?" he enquired admiringly. "Of course, I should have expected that of investigative journalists like yourself and Mr Kent. Did you also discover why I was discharged from MI6?" St John moved closer, the gun still levelled menacingly in Lois's direction. "Oh, and incidentally, where is Mr Kent? I was hoping you would bring him along with you - you do seem to be inseparable these days."

< I wish I had brought you, Clark!> Lois thought frantically.

St John was within about six feet of her, his finger hovering over the trigger. "You are becoming far too much of a nuisance, Miss Lane. You really should have died four years ago, you know; it would have saved all of us so much trouble."

"Well, unfortunately for you and Lex Luthor I didn't!" Lois exclaimed, launching her foot skywards in a karate kick in an attempt to knock St John's gun out of his hand. He anticipated her movement, however, and stepped backwards, grabbing her ankle as he did so. Lois found herself flying into the air and landing unceremoniously on her backside.

"Ow!" she yelled, trying to scramble to her feet. But she had lost any chance of getting the better of St John; he caught her firmly by the arm and dragged her to the edge of the roof. Lois screamed as she realised his intention.

He was going to push her off the roof of the Daily Planet!

She tried to twist her body around, grabbing for his tie, his lapels, anywhere she could gain purchase. But for a man in late middle age, he was very strong, and also was clearly familiar with a number of the martial arts. There was no way she was going to escape him.

He gave one hard push.

Lois fell backwards, arms and legs waving wildly, but there was no longer any ground beneath her feet. She was in free-fall, several floors from the ground.

"Help!" she screamed as the ground plummeted up to meet her.

Clark had waited in the stairwell, listening, trying to determine

where Lois had gone. After a couple of minutes, his patience was rewarded: he could hear voices from the rooftop. He floated silently up the stairs and stood at the door, looking out with his Super-vision: he saw St John confront Lois, then the gun appear. He had been about to rush out then, but he was concerned that if St John saw the door begin to open he might panic.

Clark then calculated how long it would take him to dash downstairs, out of the front entrance of the building, change into Superman and fly up to the rooftop. Possible just a second or two too long, he thought.

Lois then launched her karate kick; despite his irritation at her carelessness in going to meet St John alone, he couldn't help but admire her courage. His admiration changed to alarm as he saw St John grab her and haul her off to the edge of the roof.

He spun into Superman and charged out of the door.

St John spun around and saw him approach; a sly smile crept over the ex-spy's features. St John gave a final push, and to his horror Clark saw Lois fall backwards off the roof.

In a blur Superman was beside St John; in a split second he had seized the man at Super-speed and immobilised him by swiftly wrapping the top of a convenient flag-pole around him. Then Superman dived off the roof, heading downwards.

What will it be like to hit the ground? Lois wondered irrationally as she continued to fall at a frightening speed. Would she feel anything? Would she be killed instantly? Who - of her friends and colleagues, that is - would find her?

How many seconds until impact?

Her entire body jolted suddenly, and she realised with shock that the speed of her descent had slowed rapidly. Opening her eyes, she saw bright blue and then a flash of yellow; it dawned upon her that she was actually being grasped tightly to someone's chest.

"Superman!" she gasped.

He inclined his head with a slight smile. "At your service, Ms Lane."

"But how... I mean, thank you! How did you know I needed saving?" < Lois, get a grip!> she instructed herself. < You sound like some dumb bimbo!>

"I believe you were calling for help?" Superman replied, a faint twinkle in his eye. "I usually pick up that emergency frequency."

He was drifting them upwards, she realised, rather than down to the ground. Remembering, Lois said agitatedly, "Nigel St John's up there - he's the one who's been trying to kill me!"

"Yes, he should still be there - I immobilised him before coming

after you," Superman informed her. "In fact, I used one of those methods you disapprove of - I wrapped him in a flagpole."

Lois laughed aloud. "I'd love to see that!"

Superman landed them on the roof: a very disgruntled-looking Nigel St John stood unable to move, with the now-ruined flagpole wrapped around him. Seeing Lois safe and in one piece, the ex-spy spat out in a venomous tone, "I hoped I'd seen the last of you this time, Miss Lane."

"Oh, just think of me as a bad penny, Nigel - I just keep turning up," Lois taunted him. Walking over until she stood directly in front of him, she added conversationally, "You know, I really would like to know why you seem to have this desperate need to end my life - have I done something to upset you, or are you simply following Lex Luthor's orders?"

St John's expression remained impassive, giving nothing away. "I regret that I don't speak to reporters."

"I think you'll speak to the police, though," Superman drawled coolly. Crossing to where St John's discarded gun lay on the ground, he picked it up by the barrel. "This should be useful evidence for the police - this *is* the gun he threatened you with, Ms Lane?"

"Yes it is," Lois confirmed.

"Good, well, in that case we'll be off. And be careful on rooftops in future, Ms Lane." With that, Superman lifted St John by the shoulder, flagpole and all, and flew off towards Inspector Henderson's precinct.

Lois, left alone, wrapped her arms about herself, suddenly realising that she was shaking, and reflected on her lucky escape. < Thank God for Superman!> she thought, then realised the irony of that reflection, coming as it did from Lois Lane, who only a few days earlier had been ultra-hostile to the Man of Steel.

She shook her head and began to make her way slowly back to the stairwell door. As she did so, it burst open and Clark appeared.

"Lois - are you all right? Superman told me what happened - what were you thinking of?" He hurried to her side and, seeing that she was shivering, stripped off his jacket and wrapped it around her. Very grateful to see him, Lois allowed him to pull her into his embrace briefly before stepping back to face him.

"Superman told you...? Then you've seen him? I need to make a statement to the police, I guess..."

"Yes, you do," Clark agreed. "Superman told Henderson you'd be over as soon as possible."

"Okay... will you come with me, Clark?" Lois asked. Now that it was all over, reaction was beginning to set in.

"Sure." He exerted a little pressure on her shoulders to draw her

towards the door. "Let's get back inside first."

Leading Lois back down the stairs, Clark tried to restrain his impatient desire to demand what she thought she had been doing going up there on her own; although he was genuinely concern for her safety and was shaken himself at what could have happened, he was aware that she would resent any chastisement from him. She had almost been killed - but he had no right to rip up at her because of it. They were partners and friends... maybe a little more, but it was too early to presume that he had any rights where she was concerned. As they exited the stairs on the newsroom floor, he sighed and spoke gently.

"Lois, why did you go to meet St John on your own? Why didn't you at least tell me what you were doing?"

She shrugged. She already knew that she had been stupid, and didn't want it rubbed in. "He wanted me to come alone. Sure, I knew it could be a trap, but I figured I could handle it."

"But, Lois, he's tried to kill you three times already. I just don't understand how you could have...." Clark broke off, afraid that he was only going to make Lois angry with him if he continued to voice his frustration and worry.

His attention was caught by Jimmy, who had caught sight of the two of them and was on his way across. "Hmmm - uh, Lois, unless you want to explain all this to Jimmy, maybe we better get going?"

Lois grimaced and slipped Clark's jacket off her shoulders, returning it to him. "Yeah, just let me get my purse - then let's get out of here before Perry sees us."

Later, as they climbed out of a cab outside the Planet building, Lois continued to shake her head in disbelief. "I still can't believe St John committed suicide, Clark."

Clark shrugged. "He took the easy way out for him, I guess." At Lois's surprised expression, he explained. "As far as we've been able to figure out, St John was involved in whatever's going on with the election up to his neck. He was also implicated in the gun-running business. And we had already guessed he was behind those attempts on your life. He took a huge risk contacting you to ask you to meet him - I thought about it on the way over to the police station and I concluded that he was probably getting desperate." He pushed open the large glass door, holding it for Lois. "If the orders were coming from Luthor, then St John had failed a number of times. And if there's one thing I'm sure about where Luthor's concerned, it's that he doesn't tolerate failures. That meeting with you on the roof was probably make-or-break for Nigel. He failed - because Superman got in the way - and he ended up in police custody."

Lois was following Clark's argument - it made sense. "But why kill himself? He could have turned State's evidence against Luthor."

Clark shook his head. "You think Luthor would have let him get away with it? One hint of it and an assassin would have been despatched."

In fact, Luthor probably wouldn't even have waited for Nigel to make the offer. No, I think that once it got to this stage he knew it was suicide or murder. So he killed himself."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," Lois agreed. "Why else would he have had a cyanide pill with him anyway? What puzzles me is how he managed to hide it - the police took his belongings when he was checked in."

Clark shrugged. "Probably hidden in the frames of his glasses or something. Remember, he was a spy."

"Well, at least Superman can testify that there was an attempt to kill me - so there's more proof of that," Lois commented. "Except that with Nigel dead, the police will probably close the file - although what motive would Nigel working alone have had?"

Clark was well aware of that possibility, and in fact had managed to get five minutes alone with Henderson to try to persuade the inspector that Lois's life could well still be in danger. He had come away feeling that his police contact was simply humouring him, however.

"Well, we'll still be on alert," he reassured Lois now. "And if there are any more attempts, we'll know for sure that Luthor is involved." As the elevator doors opened, Clark added, "And I know Superman will keep looking out for you."

Lois grimaced. Clark caught it and his heart sank; he'd thought Lois was getting over her irrational dislike of his alter ego. But she surprised him.

"I must really have made Superman angry that day at my apartment," she mused aloud, sounding a little... upset? Ashamed? Clark wasn't entirely sure. "He left so quickly this afternoon - after rescuing me. I mean, I know he had to take St John to the police, but - well, he did leave kind of abruptly."

Clark quickly glanced down at the floor, unwilling to allow Lois to see the surprise in his expression. She'd *wanted* to talk to Superman? Well, maybe he should do something about that...?

Perry, once he had heard the news, instantly demanded stories from both journalists on St John's arrest and suicide, his background and relationship to Lex Luthor, and the attempts on Lois's life; this kept the two busy for the next hour or so. Clark volunteered for the task of researching St John's background in greater depth, and summoned Jack to his desk; Lois deliberately eavesdropped as Clark gave Jack a list of questions and possible sources before sending the young man off to borrow Jimmy's computer.

Lois wanted to tackle Luthor; after gathering her notes she called Luthor's secretary at LexCorp. The gatekeeper was doing her job well today: it actually took Lois almost fifteen minutes to get put through to Luthor himself. Her personal record for getting past such gatekeepers was thirty seconds, so she was feeling very worked up by the time Luthor's crisp voice came down the line to her.

"Ms Lane - so nice to hear from you again, and so soon. Was there something you omitted to ask this morning?"

Lois inhaled, then carefully moderated her voice. "It's just a follow-up interview, Mr Luthor: I wondered whether you had any comment to make about the death of Nigel St John?"

"Nigel St John?" Luthor actually sounded surprised.

"Yes - he was your personal assistant. We covered that this morning...?"

"Yes, of course," Luthor agreed calmly. "I was just somewhat surprised that you mentioned his death - as far as I am aware, Nigel is very much alive. I spoke to him only about an hour ago."

"You did?" Lois asked rhetorically. "Would you care to tell me what that conversation was about?"

"I would not, Ms Lane." Luthor's voice took on an impatient tone. "It concerned my confidential business affairs."

Lois chose her words carefully, hoping for maximum impact. "Well, I just thought it might be important, Mr Luthor. You see, that conversation with you was possibly the last thing Nigel St John did before coming to the Daily Planet to try to kill me."

There was a pause, and Lois could clearly hear a sharply-indrawn breath. "Ms Lane, if this is some sort of practical joke...."

"It certainly didn't feel like a practical joke when your personal assistant pushed me off the roof of the Planet, Mr Luthor," Lois replied sharply, hoping for... she wasn't sure what, but a response from the head of LexCorp which would give them at least a fraction of evidence that he was in on the plot.

"Well, I'm afraid that I really don't know what you are talking about, Ms Lane," Luthor replied crisply.

"In that case, might I suggest that you speak to Detective Inspector Henderson?" Lois suggested smoothly. "He will be able to confirm what I said about St John's attempt on my life - and that he is dead."

Luthor paused again. "Well, if what you say is true, then all I can tell you - on the record, since I assume that is why you called - is that I am deeply shocked at this news. Nigel St John was an excellent personal assistant, and he will be greatly missed by myself and my staff. As for your allegation that he tried to kill you... well, I find that extremely difficult to believe. I had no idea that Nigel would do anything of the kind."

What an actor, Lois thought cynically. She tried again. "You were aware that Mr St John used to work for the British Secret Service, until he was dishonourably discharged?"

Luthor's response was immediate and unsatisfactory. "What Nigel St John did before he was employed by me is irrelevant. As far as I am concerned, he does - did - his job satisfactorily, and that is the

only thing which matters." He paused, then added, "And that is all I am prepared to say on the subject, Ms Lane. You will understand that I have received a shock. Goodbye." There was a click as the receiver at the other end of the line was replaced.

Lois read back over her notes, desperately searching for any hint that Luthor had not been as taken by surprise as he had pretended, but coming up with nothing. Her concentrating slipping, her gaze drifted over to where Clark sat at his desk, intently studying something on his computer screen. His gaze seemed to be focused on the monitor, but Lois suspected that his mind was elsewhere; one hand was cupping his chin and he appeared to be deep in thought. Yet again, she found herself reacting in a physical way to this extremely attractive man, and her mind wandered back to the passionate kiss they had shared outside her apartment a mere few days before.

As if he had realised he was being watched, Clark swung around to face her, his serious expression being quickly replaced by a soft smile. "Any luck?"

She shook her head despondently. "Either he's the best liar in the world, or he's actually telling the truth."

Clark raised an eyebrow. "My money's on the liar."

"Yeah, and I want to agree with you. But he really seemed to be shocked that St John's dead, and his reaction when I told him St John had tried to kill me was - well, disbelieving." Lois stretched, feeling stiff from sitting in one position for too long. "I don't know where we go from here."

Clark thought for a moment. "Well, we need to finish off these pieces for Perry, then we'll have to start again looking for connections to Luthor." He stretched as well, placing his hands at the back of his head and interlacing his fingers. "St John's death is pretty convenient: Henderson is working on tying him to the burglary and booby-trap in your apartment, and it seems there may also be evidence linking St John to that hit-and-run driver."

"There is?" This was news to Lois.

"Yeah - I haven't had a chance to tell you. Henderson called me about twenty minutes ago. We knew the hospital thought the interference with the driver's drip was sabotage - well, after Superman brought St John in and explained what he'd tried to do to you, St John became the police's prime suspect as well. They faxed across a photo of St John to the hospital, and one of the orderlies remembered seeing him there last night. He was apparently wearing a white coat."

"Which explains why he was able to get to our driver," Lois concluded.

"Yep." Clark sighed. "So I think the police have decided the case is closed, that St John was the only link to everything they were investigating."

Lois frowned. "He was certainly involved in the gun-running thing, and we have no evidence that it went beyond him. And I guess the police would take that as his motive for trying to kill me."

Clark nodded. "But don't forget the election. What would St John have to gain from helping Leeson? And how could he be working for her without Luthor's co-operation? We also know that Luthor seems to want Leeson to win."

Lois met Clark's gaze. "So what does Luthor stand to gain from that?"

Clark shrugged. "Believe me, I've asked that question dozens of times. No answers so far, though. I even tried looking at it the other way around: what hold could Leeson possibly have over Luthor that he would agree to make sure she won the election?"

Lois sat up straight. "Hang on a second, Clark - I think you've hit on something there!"

"What - you think it might be that Leeson has a hold over Luthor?"

Lois shook her head. "You said, make sure she won the election. How could Luthor - or Luthor with St John - do that? If they were going to make sure, it wouldn't be through legitimate means. But somehow, over the past few weeks, the polls have swung pretty dramatically in Leeson's favour. How could that be done?"

"You tell me!" Clark exclaimed. "I've been trying to figure that out myself. It's not even as if Maxwell has *done* anything, or they've leaked damaging information about him - that'd be the obvious way to spike an opponent."

"And it's not as if Luthor and Leeson's team can manage to bribe most of the electorate of Metropolis," Lois added. "So they must have done something else...." She trailed off as Clark straightened in his chair.

He reached for his phone. "I think it might be an idea if I tried to speak to Leeson," he explained.

"On the phone? Will she talk to you?"

"Oh, I've had pretty good access," Clark assured her. "But no, I think I need to speak to her face-to-face."

Two minutes and much smooth-voiced persuasion later, Clark had an appointment with Mayor Leeson for twenty minutes' time. Lois was about to gather her things to accompany him, but he frowned and admitted that the appointment was just for himself.

"Lois, it's not that I don't trust you or anything," he assured her as he took in her annoyance. "It's just that... well, I've managed to get pretty close to Leeson and some of her staff during the campaign, and if she's going to let anything slip now that St John's dead, she's more likely to do it with me." < And on my own, I might be able to sneak a look into some of her files or something > he added to himself. "And anyway, you need to get on with the St John articles for Perry."

"And what about yours?" Lois demanded, still unappeased.

"I'm still waiting for Jack to finish the searches I asked him for,

but the piece about his attempts on your life is done - it's on my computer if you want to read it." Clark paused, then decided to risk adding, "I've added in a few quotes from Superman, based on what he said to me after what happened earlier. If you want to expand on that section, go ahead."

"Oh, thank you, Mr Kent!" Lois drawled sarcastically. "It was *me* in free-fall off the roof, after all!"

Clark seemed about to say something, then thought better of it, shrugged, and headed towards the elevator. Lois, never one to miss an opportunity, crossed to his computer and started to scroll through the article on the screen. The account of the attempts on Lois's life was very good, she thought in grudging surprise. Clark had done his homework, and the eyewitness accounts - when he had been present to see what had happened - were interspersed with information from police reports and a couple of quotes from Inspector Henderson. The only recent attempt which so far could not be tied to St John was the incident in Milton St when she had nearly been crushed by falling masonry. The only person who could have provided evidence of a link in that case was Mitch, but unfortunately he was also dead.

Reading the article, Lois realised that she hadn't yet told Clark that St John had appeared to confirm that he had somehow been involved in the ambush in the Congo four years earlier. What was it he had said.... "You really should have died four years ago...." Well, it wasn't exactly an admission; it could even be no more than an observation. But hadn't he added something about that saving.... "all of us" a lot of trouble? Lois frowned. Who exactly was 'all of us'?

Shaking her head, she added in a couple of sentences to provide more information on the events before Superman's arrival, then turned to Clark's other piece; as he'd said, it was nowhere near finished. The account of Nigel St John's life before he had been employed by Lex Luthor was simply a series of notes, with question-marks and blanks where Clark was clearly waiting for more information. Lois closed the document down and leaned her elbows on Clark's desk, concentrating.

After a few minutes, she called up Clark's notes on the Mayoral campaign again, this time paying particular attention to anything he had said about campaign spending. There wasn't much there, so she flicked through Clark's Rolodex until she came across the name of a contact who worked for a lobbying agency. After an interesting conversation with that woman, Lois then phoned a firm of pollsters. Sitting back in Clark's chair afterwards, she mused that she now had some potentially useful information. According to the lobbyist, a couple of weeks into the campaign Leeson had increased the amount of political advertising and sponsorship of one sort or another. No journalists had picked this up, and even the lobbyists hadn't paid it particular attention. The additional advertising could of course be explained by the situation of an incumbent afraid of losing and therefore panicking; but Lois was more inclined to believe that it was because Leeson was being bankrolled.

The polling information was even more interesting. The data which had been released to the media simply included the overall level of support for each candidate, and some additional data indicating the electorate's confidence in either candidate on particular issues. On

these figures, until a little over a month ago Maxwell was leading on just about every issue. Putting the polling data chronologically together with the date after which Leeson's spending increased, it was possible to argue that there *might* be a relationship - though not to Perry's satisfaction, Lois was aware. In fact, she was fairly confident that, if Clark had been there he would have said she was reaching. Darn it, *she* knew she was reaching.

But the additional data she had obtained from the contact at the polling firm was intriguing. Voters had been asked, through the campaign, whether they had changed their minds and if so, why. A large number of swing voters had been identified, almost all of whom had swung from Maxwell to Leeson. However, very few of them had been able to come up with concrete reasons for this change of opinion. Comments such as 'it's just the right way to vote', or 'why would we want anyone else as Mayor' had been recorded, more frequently than would be the result of mere chance. No such comments had been recorded before about the third week of the campaign. There was definitely *something* going on there - but what was it?

Flying over the Metropolis skyline in the direction of the Planet building, Clark changed his mind and instead headed towards the LexCorp building. He wasn't quite sure what he could achieve, but it occurred to him that it might prove useful to check on the current activities of its CEO. Perhaps some careful taunting of Luthor might also yield some benefits.... Clark considered this as he mused on the results of his conversation with the Mayor.

Patricia Leeson had been happy to grant his request for a private interview; Clark suspected it had been because she had wanted further publicity for the new policies on policing which she had very publicly launched that morning. He had played along with her for about ten minutes, playing the sympathetic newspaper reporter, nodding and smiling in an attempt to get her to lower her defences. Clark had been told by female colleagues at the Planet - not Lois - that his smile was one of his greatest advantages in gaining people's confidence; the warm friendliness of his smile, the way in which it lit up his face and gave him a more boyish, genuinely charming look was something which, he was assured, few people could resist. Clark wasn't so convinced of this himself: he had tried it in front of his mirror a few times and was unable to see anything beyond his own, rather ordinary face with an awkward sort of smile on it. It never occurred to him to wonder whether onlookers noticed something which he didn't; however, if smiling at his interviewee would help him to gain the quotes he needed, he generally wasn't averse to trying it.

Mayor Leeson was perhaps no less susceptible than any other female to Clark Kent's open, encouraging manner, and she talked almost non-stop for the ten minutes or so which Clark had allowed her. He had then leaned forward and clicked off his tape recorder. She had frowned in surprise; was the interview over already? But hadn't Mr Kent asked for at least half an hour of her time?

Clark had then - having checked with his Super-hearing that none of Leeson's aides was in the vicinity - announced in a soft voice that his real purpose in wanting to speak to the Mayor was to ask her some

questions about an individual whom he was investigating. He had deliberately paused before dropping the name into the ensuing silence: Nigel St John.

The Mayor's surprised gasp had been clearly audible. She had then tried to cover by protesting that she knew very little about St John, that he was merely the assistant of one of her supporters and he had been seconded to assist in the final weeks of the campaign. Clark had immediately replied that he was aware that St John was Lex Luthor's personal assistant: an odd choice of secondee, wouldn't the Mayor think?

But she had declined to think, so Clark had tried again. A former British secret agent, working on her re-election campaign: wasn't that just the smallest bit strange?

Clark had been convinced that the Mayor's expression of shock was genuine. She hadn't known of St John's background. He had gone on to suggest that there was some evidence that St John was mixed up in a few unsavoury matters, and had put it to her that it would do her campaign no good if the Planet ran a story about St John and his involvement with her re-election team. She had protested that she had known nothing about anything of that sort, but that in any case she would not draw conclusions about anyone based simply on hearsay: as yet Clark had produced no evidence for his allegations.

Clark had then delivered the bombshell: the attempt on Lois Lane's life at the Planet.

Patricia Leeson had visibly turned white; not, Clark suspected, because she had known anything about the attempted murder, but because of what the scandal would do to her campaign. "I'll... I'll have to throw him off the team," she had gasped in obvious dismay.

Clark had then smiled slightly. "I'm afraid it's a little late for that, Mayor - you see, Mr St John died a little earlier this afternoon, after being taken into police custody. The police are treating it as suicide."

He had then taken advantage of her shock to press his point further. "Is there anything else you can tell me about Mr St John, or about his relationship with Lex Luthor - or even why Mr St John was on your re-election team?"

The Mayor by now had been anxious to extricate herself from all possible fallout. She had nodded in agreement as Clark had gestured towards his tape recorder, and had proceeded to explain how she had been approached by Lex Luthor during the second week of the campaign, as her poll ratings had dropped yet again. Luthor had suggested that he could help her get re-elected; in answer to her question of 'how', he had offered to lend her one of his aides - Nigel St John - to help on her campaign team.

"So why would Lex Luthor want you to win?" Clark had prompted a little later.

She had shrugged. "I got the impression he really didn't like Maxwell - that he thought Maxwell might get in his way too much. He's not exactly a friend of big business, you know...." Leeson had explained

hesitantly.

"So what was the payoff?" Clark had murmured softly, hoping to catch Patricia Leeson off guard.

He hadn't really succeeded; she had looked flustered, then insisted in her best politician's voice that she always tried to act in an even-handed manner and that it was presumably this quality which Lex Luthor had admired. Clark had terminated the interview, happy with what he had achieved. He now had proof that Luthor was trying to manipulate the outcome of the election, and that he appeared to have the outgoing, and possibly incoming, mayor in his pocket.

Once he had left City Hall, Clark had ducked into an alley and changed into Superman, then hovered above the roof to see what the mayor's next move would be. He had been unsurprised to see her reach for the telephone; even less surprised when he had heard her ask to speak to Lex Luthor. Her voice had been agitated as she had told Luthor about Clark's visit and insisted that she wanted nothing more to do with his plans...< *what* plans> Clark thought in frustration, but she said nothing further which would have enlightened him. He had just about been able to hear Luthor ordering her to stop getting hysterical and continue doing as she was told. Luthor had concluded by stating coldly that if anything went wrong it would be Leeson who would take the fall. There would be nothing to tie him to what they had done.

< *What* have you done?> Clark again wondered, but there had seemed no immediate way of finding out. So he had decided to pay Lex Luthor an impromptu visit.

Hovering above the roof of LexCorp a couple of minutes later, Clark used his X-ray vision to look down into Luthor's penthouse apartment and office suite. Luthor was in his office, pacing up and down as he spoke to a man Clark didn't recognise, although judging by his accent the stranger was Indian.

"Now that fool Nigel has done away with himself, I need someone to keep an eye on Leeson - that woman is so silly and hysterical she's likely to ruin everything the next time someone asks her a question," Luthor was saying.

"Indeed, sir," his companion replied. "I will ensure that it is taken care of." He seemed about to leave, but instead paused and asked, "The... other task that St John left incomplete...? The notes and papers...?"

Luthor shook his head. "I will deal with that myself. They will be in my possession by tomorrow evening."

< Lois's notes on the gun-running?> Clark wondered. This looked like Luthor was planning to take up where Nigel St John had left off, certainly in relation to dealing with whatever evidence they believed that Lois possessed about Brentford's arms dealing. And - if only he could use it - for the first time there was evidence that Luthor himself was aware of this business.

The other man left, and Clark decided that it was time to show himself. He drifted downwards until he was standing on the balcony of Luthor's office; he strode forward and rapped on the large picture

window.

Luthor whirled around in surprise; then his face assumed a pleasant, welcoming expression and he flicked a switch. The window opened and Superman walked through, keeping a careful eye on Luthor in case the man had any tricks up his sleeve.

"Well, good evening, Superman; this is a pleasant surprise," Luthor drawled, one of his most charming smiles fixed on his face.

"I don't think so," Clark replied coldly. "I'm here to warn you, Luthor. I am aware that Nigel St John was not acting on his own initiative in some of his recent activities, and I want you to know that if any harm should come to - a couple of friends of mine, I will hold you entirely responsible." He paused, watching Luthor's reaction. The other man had assumed a faintly puzzled expression, and Clark couldn't discern any alteration in his heartbeat. As Lois had commented, he was an extremely accomplished liar, Clark thought as he backed away from Luthor and towards the window.

"Superman, I confess that I am completely at a loss to understand what you're talking about," Luthor drawled smoothly, his hands held palm upwards in a shrug of non-comprehension.

Clark stepped through the window, then glanced back. "I believe you know very well what I'm talking about, so take this as a warning. When friends of mine are threatened, I can get very angry - and you wouldn't like to see me when I'm angry." He then took off at Super-speed, but immediately doubled back, hovering above the penthouse again. To his immense satisfaction, he saw that Luthor was now looking extremely angry, pacing the floor and clearly making plans.

Clark was aware that he had taken a risk in revealing his knowledge to Luthor, but he had done so as a calculated guess. He assumed that Luthor would now react in one of two ways: either he would abandon his attempts on Lois's life, or he would intensify his efforts to kill her. Clark's money was on the second option, and he was determined to stick to Lois's side like glue - either as himself or as Superman - in order to ensure that she was safe. If he managed to catch Luthor's next paid assassin red-handed, so much the better.

The only flaw in this strategy would be if, somehow or other, Luthor had managed to get hold of some Kryptonite and decided to use it to deal with his flying nemesis. Clark was pretty sure that this was an unlikely scenario, however; he hadn't come across any Kryptonite for over a year and he was fairly confident that the entire sample had been destroyed. If that was indeed the case, there was nothing Luthor could do to harm him, and Lois's safety could be assured.

Remembering that he still had an article to turn in before he could leave the Planet for the evening, Clark headed back to the newsroom.

Lois glanced at her watch again; it was almost six-thirty and Clark was still not back from his appointment with the Mayor. Apart from

wanting to talk to him about the results of her enquiries, she also wanted him to come back for another reason. She had spent some time, in between making notes on possible scenarios in respect of the election, thinking about their relationship and where it was headed - where she wanted it to be headed. She knew Clark found her attractive; she also had a suspicion that he would like the two of them to be more than friends. He had asked her out the previous evening, and in a number of ways had made it clear that he considered it to be a date. But then he had left with the briefest of salutes as a goodnight kiss... and yet she *knew* he was capable of much more. So much more....

So she was going to suggest dinner at her apartment. It would have to be take-out, she reflected wryly; her cooking skills weren't all that good at the best of times, but it was already late, she was fairly sure she had little in the way of edible foodstuffs in her kitchen - apart from a couple of tubs of ice-cream and some chocolate bars - and anyway she wanted to spend their time together talking rather than cooking.

Well, she *would* suggest it, if Clark Kent ever made it back to the Planet!

Her attention was caught by the sight of Jack hovering by Clark's desk. "Do you want something?" she enquired coolly.

The young assistant raised an eyebrow at her, and she was taken aback by the air of challenge in his attitude. "Clark asked me to do some research for him - I was just bringing him the results."

Lois got to her feet immediately. "Oh, is that the material on Nigel St John? I'm working on that with Clark, so I'll take a look."

Jack shrugged. "Whatever." He dropped the bundle of papers on Clark's desk and began to move off, then hesitated and turned back. "If Clark's looking for me when he gets back, tell him I've gone to the movies with Jimmy so anything else will have to wait until tomorrow."

< Tell him yourself!> Lois thought, a little put out by this young man's presumptuous behaviour. However, she told herself to ignore it, and again sat at Clark's desk as she began to read through what turned out to be the results of an extremely thorough search - even better than many of Jimmy's best efforts. Clark's protege had managed to surprise her again, she reflected, remembering her negative feelings towards the young man with a small frisson of guilt.

Jack had traced Nigel St John back to his university career: Oxford, noted Lois with no surprise whatsoever. No doubt that had been where he had been recruited into the British secret service. Lois had seen a couple of British spy films, and as such felt that she was well aware of their methods.

So St John had gained a double first in Greats - which Lois managed to translate as the classics - at Oxford in the 1950s, and subsequently, according to the tax records Jack had been able to unearth, had been employed as a civil servant. < Nice way to disguise his true vocation> Lois considered. His employment by the British government had terminated in the late 1980s, and - Lois gasped at this point - Jack had actually managed to get some information about

this. A confidential note to the head of the British foreign service referred to 'an operative' who, it seemed, had passed confidential information about the location of British arms dumps to a hostile government in the Middle East. There had been a pay-off of some sort involved; possibly money, but the official who had penned the note seemed to think that it was more likely drugs or precious stones. The operative who had sold the information was not named, but towards the end the memorandum noted that a Mr St John was being relieved of his duties. Charges were not being brought, because of the possible repercussions were any of the details of the case to become known.

Clark would be able to produce a fascinating - and certainly exclusive - piece about St John on the basis of this information, Lois thought. That is, he would be if he ever came back! It was already after seven, and he couldn't possibly still be with the Mayor, could he?

Sighing, Lois turned to Clark's keyboard and called up a new document, then set herself to compose the first paragraph of the background article. If her so-called partner couldn't be bothered to turn up and do his job -

"Hey, Lois! Some problem with your computer?"

Lois's head swung around. "So you finally bothered to come back." The sarcasm in her voice was muted as a result of the fresh coffee and danishes her partner was carrying.

Clark strode over to his desk, first glancing around to ensure that none of the few people left in the newsroom were watching, then bending to kiss Lois swiftly on her surprised mouth.

"Hey, Kent! I didn't think you were that much of an exhibitionist!" she protested, but not very convincingly. Her plans for the evening still very much in her mind, she was happy to see that Clark still seemed interested in her as more than a friend.

He grinned and, to her surprise and delight, blushed. "Sorry. I'm not usually - I just managed to get some useful stuff out of the Mayor, and that made me happy."

"Well, wait until you hear what I've got!" Lois interjected quickly.

Clark pulled up a chair beside Lois and passed her a pastry while she excitedly went through her findings for him. He became thoughtful when she explained about the information from the polling company, then after a while steepled his fingers, resting his chin on the tips.

"So her spending went up? That's not gonna explain the change in the polls."

"No, I realise that, but...." Lois began, then trailed off as she realised she couldn't see a solution in that direction.

"I'm more interested in these swing voters," Clark observed. "So few of them have any real reason for changing their minds - the explanations are so vague. It's not even as if they said they didn't

want an inexperienced candidate, or that they preferred Leeson for her stance on crime. There is *something* going on there. But I can't put my finger on it." He fell silent, filing the information away until he could come up with an explanation, or a means of further enquiry.

"So what did you find out?" Lois asked, remembering that Clark had also suggested he had new information. "Did Leeson give anything useful away?"

Clark summarised his interview, concluding with his view that the Mayor had been genuinely scared once she'd learned of St John's activities. "I'm sure there's something going on with Luthor, as well, though she wouldn't admit it."

Lois drummed her fingers on the desk. "I think we have enough to run a piece linking her to a known criminal and alleging that she's taking bribes from an unnamed wealthy businessman."

Clark nodded slowly. "Yeah, I think we do. But do we want to?"

Lois stared at him: had he gone mad? Of course they did! "Clark...." Her voice held a critical note.

"Hang on, Lois, let me explain," he interjected quickly. "Look, what's our agenda here? When I started this, it was just about finding out what the heck had happened with the polls. We still don't know that, but we have some information which could harm Leeson - could probably force her to withdraw from the campaign. If the election was this week, I'd probably say we should print it too." He paused, and caught Lois's eye. "But we want to pin something on Luthor as well. We *know* he's involved in this, but we don't know how - we can't prove it. If we force Leeson's hand, he'll sacrifice her to save himself. I don't think we could even persuade her to give us what we need on Luthor to save herself, though - I think she's too scared of him." He took a deep breath, pleased to see that Lois was listening intently.

"So we need to get evidence to prove Luthor's involvement with her is less than above board," Lois agreed. "Problem is, if she won't help us then how?"

Clark shrugged. "Not sure yet. But I realised something when I was talking to her this evening - don't know why I didn't see it before. This was the first time I'd spoken to Leeson without aides and staff around, and it showed. She doesn't exactly live up to her reputation...."

"In what way?" Lois wondered aloud.

"Well... without wanting to seem patronising, she's not particularly intelligent, Lois. Certainly nowhere near bright enough to have clawed her way up the political ladder all on her own. So I think...."

"That she didn't do it on her own?" Lois finished for him.

"Exactly. We need to look into her last campaign a little more closely," Clark finished. "If my guess is right, she's a puppet

mayor, and we wouldn't have to look too hard to see who's pulling her strings."

"Luthor."

"Precisely." Clark adjusted his glasses and, for a moment, adopted a fierce expression which surprised Lois; she hadn't seen her mild-mannered partner in this frame of mind before.

"It all comes back to the same problem, Clark - how do we prove it, if Leeson won't talk?"

He shrugged. "I'm all out of ideas right at the moment."

Lois stared into space for several moments, willing inspiration to come to her. Nothing came; then she remembered the documents Jack had brought. "Clark - not that it helps us with Luthor, but Jack left this stuff for you. It's all about St John."

Clark's attention shifted to the pile of papers on his desk. "Darn - I forgot about that piece. I'll have to write it now." He reached for the pile and began to sift through it, wishing that Lois would return to her desk so that he could read at Super-speed.

But she was in no hurry: she proceeded to summarise the most interesting information in the bundle, while acknowledging that none of it got them any further in respect of Luthor. "My guess is Luthor knew all about St John's background when he employed him - that's probably why he employed him in the first place. But Nigel's dead now, so he can't help us any more."

"Yeah," Clark agreed slowly. "I checked with Henderson before I got back here; his officers had searched St John's apartment, but there was very little there in the way of personal items. It was almost as if he did little more than sleep there."

"Or someone cleared it out before the cops got there," Lois observed cynically.

Clark shrugged. "Probably. It's only what I would have expected." He hesitated; he really wanted Lois to leave him alone so that he could get on with the article quickly. But he didn't want her to leave the Planet without him; he wasn't going to take any chances with her safety.

Inspiration struck; he suggested that Lois might look out some of the files on the last Mayoral election, three years ago. "It'd give us a head start for tomorrow morning, and if you do that while I write up this piece then I can walk you home."

"But you'll be ages yet - you have to read all that stuff first," Lois protested.

However, to her surprise Clark shook his head, smiling. "I speed-read, Lois - don't you? It's one of the tricks they recommended at journalism school." < Except that I didn't pick it up there > he mused with amusement. "And this won't be difficult to write - I should be through in under an hour."

A little late for dinner, Lois mused as she returned to her own desk,

but not **too** late, especially if they ordered in something like pizza or Chinese. And they should still have some time to talk about where their relationship was headed.

She was extremely surprised when, barely forty minutes later, Clark announced that he was ready to go. Frowning, she stared at him. "How could you be done so soon?"

He shrugged. "I don't hang around. Anyway, this was an easy one - you and Jack had all the information for me, so I just had to arrange it." Standing in one swift movement, he snagged his jacket from the back of his chair and shrugged himself into it, deliberately changing the subject as he added, "You ready to go?"

Lois shut down her computer. "Yeah - **I** was ready nearly two hours ago, Kent!"

He grinned at her. "And I thought you were a dedicated journalist who didn't understand the concept of off-duty, Lois!"

She pulled a face at him. "That depends."

"On what?"

"On whether I have anything interesting to do in my off-duty hours," she commented pointedly, with a smirk in Clark's direction.

"Yeah? And does that mean you do tonight...?" Clark enquired with another grin, enjoying this exchange.

"Well, I was thinking we could...."

As Lois began to reply, Clark's super-hearing kicked in. < Oh, no!> he groaned silently. < Not now!> Whatever plans Lois had in mind for the evening were lost as he listened to several sirens, followed by an emergency services operator explaining to those on their way to the incident that the fire was at a children's home and was swiftly getting out of control.

He would **have** to go.

But Lois - he couldn't leave her on her own; her life was still under threat, and he **had** to be around to protect her.

But did that mean he could abandon children to their fate in a burning building?

He sighed heavily, leading Lois to stare at him.

"Clark, what is **wrong** with you? You didn't answer my question, and now you're staring into space as if you want to be somewhere else! If you don't want to spend time with me, then just say so, and we'll forget the other night ever happened!" Her tone was angry and impatient, and Clark realised that he couldn't really blame her.

Resignedly, he faced her. "Lois, I **do** want to spend time with you. And the **last** thing I want, believe me, is to forget the other night. Or last night. I **want** us to have a relationship beyond partners, and I hope you want that too." He sighed again, desperately

wishing that he didn't have to do this. "It's just that... right now... I have to be somewhere else. I'm sorry, Lois."

A further two sirens could be heard, and the operator announced that the fire was now in danger of spreading to the apartment block next door. With a helpless gesture in Lois's direction, Clark turned and hurried towards the stairwell, pulling at his tie as he ran. He would just have to hope that Lois would be safe, and that she wouldn't do anything risky while he was away.

Lois stood unmoving, staring after her departing partner. What was she supposed to make of that? He *said* he wanted to be with her - yet he had just rushed off without an explanation. She could have accepted it if he had told her earlier that he already had plans for that evening, but he had led her on - practically intimated that they would spend the evening together, when he'd all but asked her to wait until he was finished so that he could walk home with her.

What was he really up to? Could she trust him? Or was he unreliable, after all, like all the other men in her life?

Slowly, she dragged herself towards the elevator and once outside the Planet building, took a cab home, no longer feeling like walking.

An hour later, Clark flew wearily towards his apartment; he smelt of smoke and badly needed a shower. He was aware that his weariness had nothing to do with the fire; although it had kept him very busy, mercifully there had been no fatalities and he had managed to get things under control fairly quickly. Most of his time had actually been spent on making the buildings safe for the fire crew to enter.

No, he was frustrated, fed up, because he had been forced to run out on Lois. And he knew that she had not been happy about it. It had been obvious that she had been planning something for the two of them, and *that* seemed to suggest that she too wanted them to be more than friends. But he had, without warning, just left. And without any kind of adequate excuse, as well. He didn't even have a good excuse he could give her now - sure, he could claim to have been covering the fire for the Planet, but why? One of the staffers had been there - Clark had noticed Murray, an experienced all-rounder, interviewing one of the fire officers. And anyway, how could he, Clark, have known about the fire when they'd been at the Planet?

So that was out as an excuse. He sighed heavily.

Maybe he should just tell Lois the truth.

Shocked, Clark came to an abrupt halt on his balcony. Tell Lois about Superman - where had that thought come from? And was he crazy? Remember Lana, his brain told him. Remember her views about his powers. And remember Lois Lane's attitude to Superman.... < I must read her article > his sub-conscious reminded him. < See whether she really has changed her views.... >

Clark shook his head. If he and Lois were going to have any kind of a serious relationship, she *had* to be in on the secret. She certainly

wouldn't thank him if she found out on her own, or if he only told her after their relationship had progressed some distance. Couples weren't supposed to have secrets, he reflected.

So when should he tell her? He couldn't answer that one. But on the other hand, he reminded himself, they didn't **have** a relationship - not yet. And probably not at all, after tonight, he thought glumly.

But what was he thinking of to imagine telling Lois his secret, his inner voice demanded. This was a woman he had known a little over **two weeks**. There were people he had known for a number of years, and felt very close to, in whom he would not even imagine confiding this secret. How could he possibly tell Lois? He had no idea what she was really like, but what he did know was that she was still in some ways hostile to Superman. She was also a very ambitious journalist: how did he know that she wouldn't rush to grab a front-page exclusive, and more than likely a major journalism prize, the moment his back was turned? This would be big news, and no-one would understand that better than Lois Lane. He understood that very well, both from his own knowledge of her and from what his colleagues who had worked with her before she went to the Congo had told him.

So how could he possibly contemplate telling her?

But....

His heart reminded his brain that this wasn't just about how long he had known her. He could have known Lois for two days, two weeks or two years: the answer would be the same. He loved her. She was the only woman in the world for him. He didn't know yet whether she felt - could feel - the same way about him. But she was **special**.

And he trusted her - he had no idea why, but somehow he **knew** that she would keep his secret, would defend it with everything which lay within her. Lois Lane was fiercely loyal to those she cared about - and Clark was pretty sure that he fell into that category.

He loved her; wanted to be with her for the rest of his life; therefore she **had** to be told about Superman. That was beyond question.

So the only question was: when. And also possibly: how. He **could** try dropping hints, he reflected, so that when he finally told her the truth it wouldn't be such of a shock. Hints... such as what, his rational self demanded in disbelief. Like hovering inches off the ground in front of her, reciting to her the contents of her purse, using his heat vision to re-heat her coffee when she'd let it go cold because she was too wrapped up in her work? Sure, his inner voice snorted. Sure, she'll take all of those hints without a blink, and smile prettily at you when you tell her the truth. In a pig's eye.

Well, okay, he told his rational self, maybe that's not such a good idea. But she has to know. He was determined that he would tell her, very soon, once the time was right, once it was clear where their relationship was going - once she agreed that they were a couple. **Then**, he would tell her.

That decided, he glanced at his wall clock; it was nine-thirty. Not

too late to call Lois - or even go and see her, he considered. But would she welcome him? He paused, remembering something else. He *had* planned to go and see her this evening - and as he needed, for his own comfort, to check on her safety and well-being as well, this would be an excellent opportunity....

Lois sat at the desk in her apartment, surrounded by scraps of paper filled with jottings, none of which made any sense. She was *trying* to figure out a way in which she and Clark could link Luthor both to the election story and the gun-running, but with little success. If they could get Leeson to talk, they might have a chance of proving Luthor was trying to control the outcome of the election - although they still didn't know *how* he was doing it; but she could get no further on the arms story beyond the fact that Nigel had been employed by Luthor.

Before she had left the Planet she had spent some time looking into the previous election, as Clark had requested. As Perry had mentioned to her some time ago, Leeson had seemed to come from nowhere to stand as a candidate; what was also surprising about her was that she was not allied with any of the main political parties. She had described herself as an independent pro-business candidate, and had accepted help and financial backing from a number of large companies based in Metropolis, as well as some large private donations; Lois had come across a very informative article in one of the major news and analysis magazines which had revealed her sources of funding.

She was still little the wiser as to where exactly Leeson had come from: her campaign press releases were none too informative, as Clark had already commented. They had managed to discover that she had worked for Brentford; the dates seemed to suggest that she had gone direct from that job to presenting herself as a mayoral candidate. Had Brentford been her principal backer then? Had he been pulling the strings? At what point had Luthor begun to exert an influence on her?

Lois sat back in her chair and stretched her back, which was getting stiff. It had been a long day. A very stressful day in many respects; she supposed wryly that she ought to be getting used to having attempts made on her life. Such attempts at one stage had been no novelty to her, and as for death threats... they had been ten a penny in her earlier years at the Planet. But in her four years in the tiny village in the Congo she had grown accustomed to a different style of life, and the adjustment process was still difficult.

But she knew that Nigel throwing her off the roof of the Planet was not actually what was occupying her mind. Oh, certainly, she had no wish to experience that terrifying sensation of freefall again. But it was Clark Kent's strange behaviour which was really bothering her.

What did he want from her? Was he simply playing with her?

Just who did he think he was, anyway?

She sighed and allowed her body to slump over the desk. This was *crazy* - she had known the man less than three weeks, and she was allowing him, or rather, his erratic behaviour, to affect her in such

a way. He was a man, for heaven's sake; men were genetically programmed to be unreliable. Lois *knew* this, had grown up knowing it. Never trust any man. Your father was untrustworthy, she reminded herself. The guys you knew at college were unreliable. Claud was the worst of the lot. They should come with a warning notice, she considered glumly. Pathologically unreliable. Do not trust at any price. Can be relied upon to walk out when you need them most and when you least expect it. Incapable of loyalty, devoid of trustworthiness.

And yet....

Clark Kent hadn't *seemed* the untrustworthy type. He also had seemed to embody a strong sense of loyalty; loyal to the core, she would have sworn a day or two ago. Perry also thought very highly of him: he would trust Clark with his deepest, darkest secret, Perry had confided a few days ago when he had asked Lois how she was getting on with her temporary partner.

So what was he up to, encouraging her to believe he was attracted to her, cared for her, and then walking out on her this evening with the flimsiest of excuses?

She gritted her teeth. He wouldn't get another chance, that was for sure.

She was startled then by the sound of tapping outside her window; curious and not a little anxious, she edged cautiously out of her chair and pressed her body against the wall, trying to see who was there. Spotting the flapping red cape, she heaved a sigh of relief - at least it wasn't some other madman trying to kill her - and pulled open the window.

"Superman - what are you doing here? Umm... come in!" She stepped back to allow him entry, frowning in puzzlement as she wondered why he would be visiting her at her apartment, especially at this time of night.

"Thank you, Ms Lane," Clark replied formally, stepping into the room. "I apologise for disturbing you - I just wanted to check that you were okay after your fright earlier today."

Lois gave him a startled glance. "Do you always do that, Superman - check up on your rescuees, I mean?"

< Darn... I should have had a better cover story> Clark told himself. "Uh... no, but this was a little different, Ms Lane." He moved into the centre of the room, deliberately allowing his cape to swish around him as he walked, knowing that it would distract Lois's attention. It did; she watched him with an almost fascinated expression.

"Superman... thank you for what you did today," she said softly after a moment. "I was pretty scared - I really thought I was going to die, then. I couldn't believe it when you caught me. You just seemed to come from nowhere!"

He smiled lightly at her. "As I said, I heard you screaming. I'm just glad I was quick enough to capture St John and catch you." Clark paused; there was something else he had needed to say. "I spoke to

Clark a little while ago - he was at his apartment when I went to change my suit," he volunteered cautiously.

Lois threw him a curious look. "You did? He's at home?" What was Clark doing at home? Just why had he run off on her, then? What was he up to?

Clark realised the trap he had set for himself, and tried desperately to retrieve the situation. "He had promised to help one of his neighbours with something, I think - I know he said he got back late from work." Well, it was true, Clark told his conscience defensively. He *had* promised his downstairs neighbour that he would put up a couple of shelves for her. He just hadn't managed to do it yet. But perhaps Lois might accept this as an explanation for his abrupt departure.

Changing the subject, he added, "I wanted to make sure you were okay, because I had to rush off pretty quickly earlier. You were so understanding and... kind after the Chicago explosion, I didn't want you to think I was being rude."

Taken aback, Lois was unsure how to reply for a moment, then said hesitantly, "No, I... not at all, I didn't. I knew you had to get St John to the police." She paused, then added on a sudden rush of breath, "I guess I did wonder whether you were still mad at me for the things I said when I interviewed you?"

Shaking his head, Clark quickly assured her that she was wrong. "Ms Lane... Lois?" She nodded acquiescence. "You said some things which made me think, as well as a few things other people have accused me of before. That's not a problem," he added, then gave her a quick flash of a smile, "Though I haven't seen your profile yet: perhaps I should save the compliments until then?"

Lois smiled back, then grimaced as her aching back protested again. "I don't think there's too much in it you'd object to, though I promise you it isn't a fluff piece."

"I wouldn't expect anything of that kind from you, Lois," Superman assured her. He added quickly, "Are you all right? You looked as if you were in pain."

A wry grimace crossed her face. "Too much bending over my laptop. My back's stiff."

Superman gestured towards her armchair. "Sit down, and bend forward."

Lois frowned at him even as she complied. "What are you...." What *was* this extra-terrestrial planning to do to her? But she soon found out; his fingers were initially gentle on her upper spine as he traced the muscles and vertebrae. She winced as one particularly painful spot was touched.

"Okay, found the problem - if you keep still, I can sort it out for you," Superman's soft voice came from somewhere over her shoulder. His touch grew harder as his finger massaged the taut muscles through her thin cotton blouse. Then she felt a strange warmth.

"What's that?" She jerked and almost turned around, but his hands

were firm on her shoulder.

"Sorry, I suppose I should have warned you," the soothing voice replied. "I just applied a little heat, to soften up the muscles."

< Heat?> wondered Lois. < How does he apply heat...?> Then she realised; Superman had heat vision, and he had clearly used that on her. She marvelled again at the abilities possessed by this strange man.

"There, that should do it." His voice was more matter-of-fact this time, and he stepped away from her. "Try moving."

She did, and to her surprise her back felt much better. She turned to face him, voicing her thanks. He shook his head, however, and announced that he had to be going.

Bidding Superman goodnight, Lois was amazed to find herself almost expecting more than the brief words of farewell he voiced. What *was* she expecting, she wondered in bemusement? A kiss? From Superman?

But why? She couldn't understand it. All right, she had changed her mind about the man - the Kryptonian, whatever he was. She admitted to herself that she had been wrong about him and about his motives. But she was attracted to *Clark*; it was Clark she wanted to have a relationship with. If he could be trusted, that was... and at the moment that was a moot point.

Superman was a very attractive specimen, that was for sure, Lois reflected. But was he even interested in women? Sure, he'd kissed her once, but with the benefit of hindsight she was pretty sure he'd done it for shock value. For some reason, he had wanted to shake her up. He hadn't liked her attitude to him, or the suggestions she had been making, so he had simply kissed her to make her angry, she now believed.

So, leaving that aside, was he actually interested in women at all?

She gave a wry smile. What did it matter if he was? She was hardly likely to be top of his list of fanciable women. And anyway... she wanted Clark.

Realising the truth of that assertion, Lois sank onto her couch with a heavy sigh. As usual, she wanted a man who seemed to place her pretty low on his list of priorities. Maybe Clark had actually had a good reason for disappearing earlier - but according to Superman he was at home right now. And he hadn't called.

As if prompted by her thoughts, her telephone shrilled.

"Lois Lane?" She answered on the third ring, giving her name in a sharp questioning tone.

"Lois? It's Clark," a familiar, apologetic voice responded.

"Oh?" She was non-committal.

"Look, Lois," Clark rushed ahead, determined not to allow things to deteriorate. "I'm really sorry about earlier. I really wanted to be with you, but I just had to be somewhere else. I didn't have any choice...." He trailed off, not wanting to lie to her.

But Lois remembered what Superman had told her, or at least hinted to her, Clark realised in relief. "Yeah, Superman said you'd promised to help out a neighbour?"

"Yeah - she's in her seventies and finds it harder to keep up with some of the odd jobs these days," Clark explained, making a silent promise to put up those shelves before he left for work the next morning. "Anyway, it's late now and I guess you won't want any company...?"

Lois was tempted for a moment, but then decided that he could wait. If he was serious about wanting to be with her, he could make her his priority for the following evening. "Yeah, it's late and I'm a bit tired. Some other time, maybe? I'll see you at work tomorrow anyway."

"Well, how about I take you for breakfast on the way in?" Clark suggested. Surprised and secretly pleased, Lois accepted.

The following morning Lois opened her door at Clark's knock, and was taken aback to see the delicate bouquet of spring flowers he was holding. "Just to say sorry about yesterday," he volunteered hesitantly, in case she thought he was presuming too much.

She took them from him, inhaling their sweet fragrance. "They're beautiful, Clark - but I didn't expect anything like this." He followed her into the apartment as she hunted for a vase in which to display them; once she'd arranged them to her satisfaction he offered his arm to escort her out. On impulse, she reached up and kissed his lips lightly. "Thank you, Clark."

His arm tightened around hers as his lips curved into a pleased smile. "You're welcome, Lois. And you can thank me like that as often as you like!"

She punched his arm in teasing retaliation, and was vaguely surprised at how hard his muscle tone was. He must *really* work out, she mused.

For someone who had managed to get no sleep the night before, Clark reflected as they strolled towards the cafe they had decided to eat at, he was feeling in extremely good spirits. He had hovered above or near Lois's apartment all night, needing to be near her in case anything else had happened to her; he didn't for one moment believe that Luthor had given up his desire to kill her. Then, just before getting ready for work, he had hurried into his neighbour's apartment, sending her into the kitchen to make coffee while he had put up the shelves in as close to super-speed as he could manage without arousing suspicion.

However, he didn't feel tired at this moment; he was just enjoying being close to Lois, and feeling that she was also enjoying being

with him. They were on the cusp of something special, he felt. It would take just one word from either of them to propel them over the edge, into a committed relationship. He was tempted to say something to her there and then, as she sipped her double mocha and nibbled on the double chocolate doughnut she had unhesitatingly chosen. But perhaps this wasn't the best of times; they had a busy day in front of them, and he would prefer to talk to her privately, in his apartment. He still had to decide on the best time to tell her about his 'special relationship' with Superman, too. Perhaps he could do that later, as well. He had definitely made up his mind to tell her, now. And it would be a relief, he thought, to have someone special who knew and understood the truth about him. Lana had never been of much help there; she hadn't wanted him to be different. He had a suspicion that Lois would be less likely to worry about his 'alien nature', but it was quite possible that she would be angry that he had appeared to her as two different people. But there, what choice had he had? He had known her for only a very short time; how could he possibly have announced to her, at their first meeting, 'Hi, I'm Clark Kent, also known as Superman?' Or, when he had rescued her as Superman, how could he possibly have said, 'Hi Lois, don't you recognise me?'

So, this evening, perhaps... he mused to himself, deciding to ask her later whether she was free. As long as no emergencies cropped up which required their immediate attention.

At the Planet, both reporters tried to escape Perry's searching eye as they busied themselves in digging up everything they could find about the conduct of the previous election campaign. Spotting Jimmy at the far side of the newsroom, Clark beckoned the younger man across.

"Jimmy, if you have a moment, could you dig up some stuff for me? You might find some stuff on the Net - psephologists' reports and analyses of the last mayoral election - if not, you might have to go over to Metro U library."

"Pseph-what?" Jimmy demanded, looking amused. "You swallowed a dictionary, CK?"

Clark raised an eyebrow. "Psephology - the study of elections, polling and so on. I want to see how Leeson got on in the polls last time round, and what the analysts said at the time."

Lois raised an eyebrow in amusement at her partner's statement. Clark had quite an extensive vocabulary, even for a journalist, she considered; he had probably never heard of the expression 'dumbing down', and if he had, he would have refused to contemplate it.

Jimmy was frowning, however. "CK? You still working on the election campaign?"

Clark nodded, a little surprised at the question. Jimmy *knew* they were on that story, and anyway, why was he still there? However, Jimmy hovered for a moment, his attention caught by a photograph of Patricia Leeson which lay among the pile of papers on Clark's desk.

"She's going to win the election, for sure," Jimmy announced to

no-one in particular. "I mean, who'd vote for anyone else? It's just the right way to vote."

Clark's head jerked up. "*What* did you just say, Jimmy?"

Lois, who had been re-reading her own notes from the previous evening, also stared at Jimmy. 'It's just the right way to vote'... that was what the polling organisation has recorded as the explanation given by a number of swing voters. < If I didn't know any better, I'd say someone's trying to manipulate people's minds here....>

"What's up, CK?" Jimmy asked, puzzled.

Clark caught the younger man's arm. "Say it again - what you just said about voting for Leeson."

Jimmy shrugged. "Well, isn't everyone? Why would we want anyone else as Mayor?"

"Clark!" Lois exclaimed. "That's word-for-word - "

"What the polling people told you yesterday. Yeah, I realise that," Clark finished for her. He turned back to Jimmy. "Where did you hear that stuff?"

Again, Jimmy shrugged. "Look, CK, I don't understand - what's all this about?"

Clark ran his hand agitatedly through his hair. "Jimmy, who were you planning on voting for yesterday?"

"Dunno - Maxwell, maybe," Jimmy replied, then looked suddenly thoughtful. "And now I'm voting for Leeson - but I have no idea why, other than that...."

"It's the right way to vote," Lois finished for him. As she got to her feet, she caught sight of Jack emerging from the elevator, and called him over.

"Jack - answer me something," she said as he approached. "Clark - go with me on this," she added as he appeared about to interrupt her.

"Jack, who're you going to vote for as Mayor?"

The young assistant shrugged carelessly. "Leeson - why would we want anyone else as Mayor?"

Clark stared at Jack. "You don't even have the vote yet!"

Jack frowned suddenly. "No way. I'm not eighteen until next month. And anyway, why would I want to vote? Politicians are all corrupt anyway."

"So why did you just say you were going to vote for Leeson?" Lois demanded.

"Because it's... the right way to vote?" Jack suggested.

Lois, Jimmy and Clark exchanged glances.

"There's something going on here, Lois, CK, isn't there?" Jimmy demanded. "Someone must have made us say those things."

"Yeah, and I've a pretty good idea what's been happening," Lois announced. She paused deliberately for effect, enjoying the sensation of three pairs of eyes focused on her.

"Jimmy, you and Jack went to the movies last night, right?" They nodded. "Well, I don't know what ads Leeson's team is running, but I'll bet - "

"Subliminal advertising!" Clark interrupted.

"Yeah, Kent, I was just about to say that," Lois grumbled in annoyance. "It was *me* who figured it out, just you remember that!"

Jimmy shook his head in disbelief. "We went to see 'Lethal Weapon IV' - and you say someone programmed us with subliminal advertising?"

"How can you prove it?" Jack demanded.

"I know one way," Clark announced in a determined tone. "I'll contact Superman and have him take a look at some of the movies - subliminal advertising doesn't work on him, and he'll be able to spot it."

"Right, let's go," Lois announced.

Clark stopped dead. "Go, Lois? Where?"

"To contact Superman and get down to the nearest multiplex - Jimmy, which one did you go to last night?"

Clark's mouth slanted into a grimace. He certainly didn't want Lois coming with him. "Look, Lois, all I'm doing is contacting Superman. He'll tell me what he's found out after he's done it. I'd really prefer it if you stayed here and tried to find out some more information from that polling company you spoke to yesterday - like how many people gave those statements as reasons for voting for Leeson. If it's a high percentage of the swing voters, then it looks like we've solved the question of 'how'."

"And Leeson's finished," Lois completed.

"Yeah. But we still don't have Luthor," Clark replied. "And I really didn't want to let him get away."

"I'm not sure you two have any choice," Perry's voice drawled from behind Clark. "If what I figure you've stumbled on is true, we're gonna have to take this straight to the cops. And Patricia Leeson'll be out on her ear quicker'n flies on a T-bone."

"I'm going," Clark announced. "Lois, please don't go anywhere until I get back - you know Luthor's probably still after you."

Lois gritted her teeth: she hated being told to stay put, especially

when *she* was the one who had figured out the subliminal advertising. But Clark was the one who knew how to contact Superman; just how did he do it? she wondered, not for the first time. As Perry, Jimmy and Jack slipped away, not wanting to confront an angry Lois Lane, she reflected again on the mystery surrounding Clark and Superman. Just how well did Clark know the man - the Kryptonian, whatever he was? Did Clark know where he went when he wasn't performing heroic acts? She mused again on her guess of a few days earlier that Superman might have a secret identity, a disguise. Clark had to know what that disguise was; she had come to that conclusion before, but it now seemed a certainty.

If she could penetrate the disguise... what a story that would be!

But....

She would certainly lose Clark's friendship in the process - and anything else she might have had with him. And Superman himself... the previous evening he had been... nice! She had actually found herself liking him, as a person. On the only other occasion on which the super-hero had visited her in her apartment, she had found herself admiring him, and feeling sympathy for him.

Was this really someone she wanted to expose? Reluctantly, she conceded that the answer to that question was 'no'.

Clark landed in the deserted alleyway behind the Planet building and quickly changed back into his work clothes. It had been a very successful expedition: he had flown to the multiplex where Jack and Jimmy had gone the previous evening, giving the manager a passable excuse as to why he needed to see the first reel of each movie currently showing. It hadn't taken him long to find what he was looking for. After the trailers, during the very last commercial before each movie, there had been several very brief subliminal messages buried. The commercial hadn't even been a political one, he thought wryly. It had been so innocent-sounding, advertising a chocolate bar. The same commercial, in each case.

He had decided to return to the Planet and take things from there as Clark, rather than go straight to the police as Superman; among other things, he still wanted to fulfill his promise to himself that he would keep a protective eye on Lois. Not that *she* would appreciate it, he well knew; he hadn't needed to know Lois for long to realise her dislike of being 'looked after' by people who thought they knew better than she did what was good for her.

So she would resent his watching over her, even though he had now saved her life four times! Though of course she wasn't aware that it was *Clark* who had saved her on the previous evening, when she'd been pushed off the Planet roof. So he would have to be discreet about it. Whatever he had to do, though, he intended to stick to her like glue.

Once back in the newsroom, Clark was surrounded by people wanting to know what he had found out; at least, it felt that way until he realised that it was only in fact four people. Perry White cut through the questions very quickly, however, instructing Clark to

come into his office. Lois, Jimmy and Jack followed, but the latter two were sent on their way, much to their mutual disappointment.

Clark quickly filled in his editor and his partner on what he explained as Superman's discovery. Perry was highly excited at this news, and urged the two of them to "Git on out of here and get that scoop written up for the evening edition!"

"Sure, Chief, but I have to call Henderson first. Much as I'd love to tie Luthor to this, I can't let innocent voters carry on getting brainwashed like this each time they go to the movies."

"Sure, sure," Perry agreed. "Just you make sure that son of a... understands that it's the Planet's story, okay?"

That wasn't a problem; Henderson was at first disbelieving, then promised to pass the information on to his colleagues in a relevant section of MPD. "You don't need to worry, Kent," he drawled sardonically. "You can tell Perry White he'll get his exclusive, and a few quotes along with it. Just as long as you send Superman down here if we want to interview him."

"I think I can do that," Clark replied with a faint smile, ending the conversation.

The two reporters were kept busy for the next few hours, writing up the story, obtaining additional information from the polling agency Lois had contacted the previous evening, and later including some quotes from a very shocked police inspector who had just viewed the affected commercial in slow motion. As part of the police's *quid pro quo*, Lois and Clark were also permitted to be present at City Hall when Leeson was arrested; they took Jimmy with them and secured what Lois was sure would be an award-winning exclusive. Jimmy got photos of Leeson being read her rights and then being led away towards the police-car in custody, and even though the representatives of the press were kept well back from the action Clark was able to hear what was said, in particular Patricia Leeson's indignant protests. "Lip-reading," he said in explanation, although of course that wasn't it at all.

"I just wish we could get to her to ask who's behind it all - who paid for the advertising," Lois grumbled as they took a cab back to the Planet. Jimmy had gone on ahead so that he could make a start on developing the pictures.

"Yeah - who was the mastermind? Cause I can promise you it sure wasn't Leeson herself," Clark added grimly. He was very sure who the mastermind was, but their chances of proving it now were very slim indeed. With Leeson under arrest, Luthor might do one of two things. He would either make sure that she took the fall for him, trusting to her fear of what he might do to her otherwise; or he might have arranged it so that she would also commit suicide... or somehow meet an unfortunate death while in police custody.

No, Leeson would not be able to help any further. Luthor had more than likely escaped scot-free - just like he has four years ago when Lois had almost been killed, and her partner *had* been killed. Clark sighed.

Lois placed her hand lightly on his arm. "Clark? Are you okay?"

He turned to her, throwing her a wry smile. "Yeah - I'm just a bit... disappointed."

"That we missed out on getting the real villain? Yeah, me too," she agreed. "But Clark, it's not over yet. We might not get him on election fraud, but there's still the gun-running."

Clark shrugged. "Sure, but the way Luthor played that, all the blame will fall on Brentford and Nigel St John - both of whom are dead. And dead men don't tell tales."

"This really bothers you, Clark, doesn't it?" Lois said softly.

He nodded, grimacing slightly. "Luthor has been trying to kill someone I care about a lot, Lois. Yes, it bothers me." There, he thought; he'd said it. Lois couldn't help but realise now that she was special to him.

She looked away; for a moment he regretted making his declaration. Was she trying to let him know, diplomatically, that she wasn't interested? But then she met his gaze again and he could see the wonder and delight in her expression.

"Thank you, Clark - that really makes me... I feel... well, thank you," she murmured in an uncertain tone. It didn't come easily to Lois to tell someone that she cared about them; particularly a man, given the lousy luck she'd had in that direction in the past. But Clark's simple declaration had moved her immensely. Clark smiled softly at her in return. He felt that he understood, from everything she had told him, and what he had learnt from Perry and Jimmy, how difficult it was for Lois to allow herself to care for anyone. Yet it seemed that she was beginning to care for him. She had shown that now on several occasions, even despite his having to abandon her the previous evening.

But it was all happening very fast; they had known each other for such a short time. It didn't matter to Clark - he knew he was in love with her. He probably had been from the instant she had emerged from Perry White's office. Would Lois resist his attempt to tell her about his feelings, if he followed through with his intention later that evening? Would she be afraid, or unsure, because they had known each other so briefly?

Well, if that was the only problem, Clark thought, then he could wait. After all, he felt as if he had waited all his life for Lois Lane. He could wait a few months longer, if that was what she wanted.

Back at the Planet, they busied themselves with writing up the rest of the story of Mayor Leeson's arrest and disgrace; Clark also did some research on what would happen next. Leeson would have to be officially removed from office, and a new election would have to be called, so that new challengers could enter the race. There was also the issue of who would run the city in the interregnum.

All in all, the Planet had several exclusives. Perry had just managed

to squeeze Leeson's arrest and one of Jimmy's photos onto the front page of the evening edition, and after that their efforts were concentrated on having a major - and potentially award-winning - splash on the front page. The by-lines, apart from one front-page editorial written by Perry White, were all Kent and Lane; Lois and Clark had enjoyed some good-natured argument over whose name would go first, but they had agreed in the end that since the story had been Clark's first, his name should appear first.

"When we write the gun-running story, it'll be Lane and Kent," Clark promised her, smiling.

"Hey, that sounds good!" Jimmy observed, grinning. "Got a sort of ring to it... like Laurel and Hardy, Penn and Teller...."

"I am *not* a phony magician with a tame big cat!" Lois protested. Clark laughed at the thought; anyone less like a Las Vegas performer than Lois Lane it would be difficult to imagine. He allowed his thoughts to drift briefly away from his work, to consider what she might look like dressed for the Vegas stage... fishnet stockings, high heels, her slim figure encased in some flattering but skimpy outfit....

He sighed and forced himself to concentrate on his keyboard.

The man's clipped voice grew more impatient as he listened to the protests on the other end of the telephone. "You knew what you were getting yourself into. You knew the risks you took."

He listened. Then, "I told you, if anything happens you're on your own."

Another long pause.

"You just remember what we agreed. My name does not get mentioned." A briefer pause this time. "I think you'll find that the next few years will be much easier for you this way. Should you forget what we agreed, let's just say that I have... contacts... on the inside who can make your life sheer hell. So much so that you might wish I had killed you."

The voice on the other end of the phone subsided, and the speaker continued. "Now, I have already helped you by organising your bail and providing a lawyer. From this moment on, you will not call me, you will not try to see me - in fact, you will forget you ever knew me."

Lex Luthor replaced the receiver and turned to Asabi. "That woman is going to be a nuisance."

"She is untrustworthy?"

"Weak, Asabi. I am not sure that she will stay silent about... others' part in events."

"Should I make arrangements, sir?" Asabi enquired.

Luthor shrugged. "So wasteful... yet I think it may be unavoidable." He moved away from his desk and stared out of the picture window for several moments. He then turned back to face his manservant. "Yes, Asabi, but I think it needs to be an accident, don't you?"

"Indeed, sir," the manservant agreed.

"Excellent. And now, I have some other business to conduct; Lane and Kent have been getting altogether too close in the last couple of days."

"Do you wish me to see to that as well?" Asabi enquired.

Luthor smiled mirthlessly. "No need, Asabi - that's all under control."

The phone on Clark's desk shrilled and he reached for it, his attention still focused on the article he was finishing off. "Kent?"

"Mr Kent?" a soft female voice enquired.

"Yes? Who is this?"

"It's Patricia Leeson." Clark sat up straight at this, his full attention now on the telephone. Why was the mayor - almost ex-mayor - calling him? She was out on bail, he was aware of that. But why would she want to speak to him? Unless...

"What can I do for you, Ms Leeson?" he enquired politely.

"I want to talk - I have some information which you might find interesting."

"What kind of information?" Clark asked, deliberately making his voice cool and uninterested.

"About who was behind the subliminal advertising," replied the mayor. Clark stiffened, glancing over to Lois and waving to attract her attention. She got up from his desk and came to join him; he mouthed 'Leeson' at her. Her eyes widened and she stood closer to him in an attempt to listen in.

"Oh? And what do you want in return?" Clark enquired.

"I thought you might put in a good word for me with the DA," Leeson suggested. "Are you interested or not?"

"Well, if I told the DA or the police about this conversation, you could find a few other charges being added to the ones you already face," Clark observed calmly. "But let's say I give you the benefit of the doubt. What do you propose?"

"Look, Mr Kent," Leeson continued impatiently, "I called you because I've always considered you to be a fair reporter, unlike some in this city. But if you don't want even more of an exclusive than you and your partner have already...." She allowed the remainder of the sentence to hang in the air.

"No, I'm listening," Clark assured her.

"Okay. Well, I want you to meet me, but it's got to be somewhere out of the way. I can't afford to be seen with you."

"When and where?" Clark asked. He glanced at Lois and caught her expression: excited, keen to get the scoop.

"The old BrentCo warehouse by the river," Leeson replied. "I'll be there in twenty minutes. Come alone - you and your partner." There was a click as the receiver was replaced at her end of the line, and Clark slowly replaced his receiver and, standing, turned to face Lois.

"Looks like we might get Luthor after all!" he crowed ecstatically. She grinned at him, then threw her arms around his neck. He hugged her back warmly; this would be a real scoop. Just wait until they presented the story to the Chief for the morning edition!

In Lex Luthor's penthouse apartment, the head of LexCorp took a long drag of his cigar and smiled broadly at the attractive woman who had just ended the telephone call.

"Excellent, Mrs Cox. Even I would have believed you were that Leeson woman - you were very convincing."

"Yes, sir," the woman purred in response, smiling in a sultry manner as she walked slowly across to her employer, deliberately allowing her body to sway sexily as she moved. "Let's just hope Lane and Kent were convinced." She slid her arms around Luthor's neck as she drew close to him.

He kissed her hard briefly, then put her from him. "Not now - I believe I have an appointment."

"You sure you've got the tape recorder?" Lois asked for about the third time since they had left the Planet.

This time Clark didn't bother to answer, simply producing it from his jacket pocket. Lois shrugged.

"Never hurts to double-check," she pointed out.

"And triple-check?" he enquired dryly.

"Of course!" she insisted. She paused, then asked, "You sure she's going to give us what we need to get Luthor?"

Clark shrugged, turning his palms upwards in a 'don't know' gesture. "I think so - I *hope* so. I can't figure anyone else who'd be behind this stuff."

"Good." Lois wanted to get this over with; to get Leeson's confession on tape and write up the story. Even if Leeson could only finger

Luthor in relation to the attempted rigging of the election, it was still more than anyone else had managed to pin on him. She was resigned to being unable to take the gun-running investigation any further: despite being confident now that Luthor was behind it, the likelihood of proving that now seemed very slim indeed. And as far as the police were concerned, that investigation, and the attempts on Lois's life, were all closed now that Nigel St John was dead.

The cab driver pulled up outside the BrentCo warehouse, and after paying him off Lois and Clark exited. Pausing outside the warehouse, Clark was tempted to X-ray it before they entered, but he hesitated; what if Lois saw him fiddling with his glasses? Instead, he listened with his Super-hearing. There was one person inside the warehouse: she had come alone. He reached for the door, and pushed it open.

The two reporters blinked as they entered the dark interior; the bright early evening sunlight had left them dazzled for a moment or two. Clark recovered first and quickly glanced around. To his shock, instead of the woman he was expecting a man in his early forties confronted them, a gun pointed in their direction.

"Ms Lane, Mr Kent. We meet again - so good of you to come," Lex Luthor drawled.

"Where's Leeson?" Lois demanded.

"Oh, Mr Kent thought he was speaking to our disgraced mayor, did he?" Luthor enquired, amused. "I must compliment my secretary on her ability as a mimic."

"It was a trap!" Clark hissed. He swiftly measured the distance between Luthor and himself, and the likelihood of Luthor taking a shot at Lois should Clark try anything. He reluctantly conceded that it was too dangerous to try anything for the moment, and decided to wait and see what Luthor had in mind.

"Did you get fed up with all your minions' attempts on Lois's life failing, and decide to finish the job yourself?" Clark enquired in a taunting voice.

Lois shot her partner a glance; she was unsure what his intentions were. Lex Luthor was a dangerous man, and he clearly saw them as a serious danger to himself. That was obvious: he would never have taken the risk of confronting them himself otherwise. He intended to kill them, she realised. But was he going to shoot them, or did he have something else in mind? And if there was a likelihood that he was going to shoot them, why was Clark trying to rile him?

"Well, you know what they say, Mr Kent," Luthor drawled in response. "If one wants a job done properly...." He left the sentence unfinished, gesturing idly with his hand .

"So - just how *do* you intend to finish the job?" Clark enquired, apparently idly. His mind was whirring, however; he considered that if he could persuade Luthor to reveal his hand, Clark might have a better chance of getting Lois out of there alive. *He* would be all right, unless Luthor had for some reason obtained Kryptonite, but as he was feeling fine he didn't think that was a possibility.

Of course, he could get himself and Lois out of the situation in an instant, if he was prepared to reveal himself as Superman. But he preferred not to do that; at least not in front of Lex Luthor. The thought of such an evil villain knowing his secret was enough to make Clark's blood run cold.

So he rejected, for the moment at any rate, any thoughts of using his heat vision to make Luthor drop the gun; that was something which would not be easily explained. Nor would any attempt to run at Luthor at Super-speed; even if he could ensure that he stayed between Luthor and Lois, there was still the problem of how he would explain the failure of any stray bullets which might hit him to cause him any harm.

Luthor seemed to decide that enough time had been wasted on pleasantries, and he gestured with his gun. "If you would both come over here...?"

The two walked in the direction which he was indicating; there was a single crate placed in the middle of the floor. Clark frowned as his Super-hearing kicked in; he could hear ticking. He mentally kicked himself for not having concentrated harder on his hearing before entering the warehouse; if he'd heard that before, he would never have gone in, and would have found some excuse to prevent Lois from entering as well.

Luthor instructed them to sit on the crate, back to back; they did so, and Clark gripped Lois's hand tightly in a gesture of reassurance. Keeping his gun trained on Lois's skull as a means of ensuring that neither of them moved, Luthor bent and picked something up off the floor; Clark realised that it was a long, thick piece of chain. Deftly, their captor wrapped it around their hands, tying them together, and then looped the ends through the bolts on the top of the crate, fastening it with a padlock.

"I don't think either of you will be going anywhere for some time," Luthor drawled. "Now, in case you hadn't realised, there is an explosive device in this crate, and it is timed to go off in just over five minutes." He paused, and began to step away from them, towards the door.

"Do make the most of the time you have left," Luthor drawled. "Goodbye, and all that." He gave a brief wave, then was gone.

Clark listened; the man's footsteps could be heard walking briskly down the pavement. He leaned forward, allowing his glasses to slip a little way down his nose, and concentrated on the wall. Luthor could be seen getting into a dark saloon car. He relaxed a little; now he could concentrate on getting them out of there.

Lois edged around on the crate until she was sitting beside rather than behind Clark, and glanced at him. They had less than five minutes to figure out a way out of there or they would be blown to smithereens; yet he wasn't exactly making any effort to escape.

Perhaps he was afraid? Too shocked to move?

She stole another glance at him; instead of the frightened or determined expression she had expected to see, his face was resigned.

Resigned... to dying?

He looked as if he had come to a decision, and that decision was not something he had wanted to do.

What was up with him? Why wasn't he doing anything?

Clark sighed. He seemed to be doing a lot of that lately. There they were, chained to the top of a crate, inside which was a ticking bomb. He hadn't bothered to try to X-ray inside the crate: the ticking sounded real enough, and anyway there wasn't really time to investigate any further.

He knew what he had to do; it was just that....

< Oh, Lois! I didn't want it to be this way!>

With an abrupt movement, he broke the chains securing them to each other and the crate, and in less than a second was on his feet. Ignoring Lois's incredulous expression, he scooped her into his arms.

"There's no time to explain, Lois - you'll just have to trust me," he told her briefly, through gritted teeth. With that he began to drift upwards, towards the skylight in the warehouse roof. He paid no attention to her gasp of shock and disbelief, thrusting out his arm to smash the glass and trying with his hand to shield her face from the broken shards which showered around them.

He flew them out of the warehouse and skywards, just as the bomb exploded beneath them with a ferocious boom and a brilliant flash of light.

Lois clung to Clark's shoulders for dear life, barely able to take in what was happening. Her partner, friend... possible lover... had grabbed her in his arms and had... *flown*... with her. Clark could *fly* - how was that possible? He had ripped apart the chains securing them as if they were made of paper - how could he do that?

Only... if he was... Superman.

As the sound of the explosion died away and he glanced downwards, as if looking for a safe place to land, she raised her head from his shoulder and glared at him accusingly.

"You're Superman, aren't you?"

"Yeah," he confessed, sounding resigned rather than proud of the fact. "I was planning on telling you - "

"Oh, you were, were you?" she replied sceptically. "Like when, exactly?" She didn't wait for an answer, instead continuing in the same sarcastic voice, "So Metropolis's great Super-hero is really a mild-mannered reporter - you probably thought I wouldn't believe you

if you had told me. And I mightn't have, though I have to say it makes perfect sense." She paused for breath, then added, "You see, I'd already figured out the secret identity bit - it just hadn't occurred to me to think it was *you*!"

Clark stilled, incredulous at this. "You had - you knew I had a secret identity?" As he spoke, he landed them in a deserted alley and set Lois on her feet.

She shrugged, now searching his face for resemblances to the Super-hero she had seen four times in all. There *were* similarities... the shape of the face, the nose, the wary expression now on Clark's face... perhaps she should have figured this out before. It was the obvious solution, after all. And yet, she mused, it was said that the easiest place to hide something was in plain sight. Superman hiding as Clark Kent, his friend and the one journalist who had - before Lois herself - managed to secure exclusive interviews with the Super-hero.

But before she could even begin to think through the implications of this discovery, Clark was speaking again. "Lois, I know we need to talk. But I'm asking you - *please* - to wait. There's something I have to do first." He paused and reached into his jacket pocket, producing the miniature tape recorder they had brought with them. Handing it to Lois, he spoke again in a more businesslike tone. "I'd like you to take this tape to Henderson, as proof that Luthor tried to kill us."

"It was recording the whole time?" Lois asked.

Clark nodded. "I set it going as soon as we went inside."

"Okay - so when did it stop taping?" she enquired tartly. Clark frowned, puzzled. She enlightened him. "I mean, was it still taping when you... *flew* us out of there? Did it record me saying you're *Superm* - "

"Lois, please!" He cut across her, anxious to guard his secret in case there should be anyone nearby. In a quieter voice he continued, "I'm not sure." He hesitated; it appeared to Lois that he was impatient to get away. To get away from her? He seemed to come to a decision suddenly, and his expression became questioning. "Lois, I think I can trust you. I know I have a lot of explaining to do, and I promise you I will do it. But I want to ask you to listen to that tape and delete anything which might... give me away, before you give it to Henderson." He gazed at her, his eyes beseeching. "Will you do that for me?"

Stung by the implication that she might use the tape against him, Lois rapped out, "Of course I will! But you better have a good explanation for this, Kent!" She stepped back from him and added, "So where are you going?"

"After Luthor, of course," Clark explained, seeming surprised that she would need to ask. "I assume he thinks you and I both died in that explosion - that's why I didn't just defuse the bomb, by the way," he added more quietly. "I thought that if he believed he'd succeeded he might be less anxious to cover his tracks now." He sighed heavily, and Lois thought that he looked very unhappy about the situation - as well he might, she reflected. He had been found

out in one very big deceit, and by the woman he had claimed to care about. He must realise that she wasn't likely to trust him now!

"Look, I don't know how long I'll be, Lois, so I'll just come over to your place later and we'll talk, okay?" he suggested. She shrugged, not bothering to answer; he sighed again and then tilted his head to one side, as if listening. He seemed satisfied at whatever he heard or didn't hear, and took another couple of steps away from her.

He then shocked her yet again by sending his body into a spin, catapulting himself round and around so quickly that he simply became a blur. A blur of charcoal grey and white... and red and blue. As Clark's figure became distinct again, suddenly she was looking at Superman.

Lois gasped; Superman acknowledged her reaction with a lift of one eyebrow before taking off. There was the sound of rushing air, then he was gone.

Lois stood alone in the alley, completely dumbfounded.

Clark scanned the streets of Metropolis, searching for Lex Luthor; the man couldn't have gone far, since it was only about ten minutes since he had left the warehouse. Luthor had been travelling by car, so unless he had transferred to helicopter, or gone somewhere underground, he couldn't be that difficult to find.

Although part of the problem was his own lack of concentration, Clark realised. He had not wanted to leave Lois like that. She had suffered a huge shock, that much was obvious. Of course she had never expected to discover that her partner - and perhaps almost-boyfriend - was Superman, a person for whom she had little time. He wished that he'd had time to talk to her properly, to convince her that he really had intended to tell her himself, to explain why he'd had to keep his super-powers a secret - why Clark Kent pretended to be just a normal human being.

He grimaced as he accepted that his other reason for being apprehensive was the issue of what Lois would do with the information she now possessed. He was well aware that this could be the exclusive of a lifetime. Lois could win a Pulitzer for revealing the truth behind 'Superman'. Would she do it? She was ambitious enough. True, he had convinced himself only the previous evening that he could trust Lois to keep his secret - but that was in a situation where he had envisaged telling her himself, with time to explain all of his reasons for needing to keep it a secret. Not like this, where he had been forced to reveal himself in order to save her, without any time to explain properly. She was angry, that much was obvious. He half-suspected, but wasn't sure, that she was also hurt; there had been something in her eyes as he had set her down on the ground.... He could understand that: despite the fact that they had only known each other for a couple of weeks, they had grown very close very quickly. They had done a lot of confiding in each other over that time; he was aware that she had told him things which she hadn't, or wouldn't, tell another soul. And yet all this time he had been hiding a very big secret from her.

And what, no doubt, made matters worse was Lois's own initial hostility to Superman. Oh, he knew that had changed; the dislike had turned into a grudging respect, he felt - and the previous evening, when he had visited her as Superman, he had even wondered whether she was perhaps coming to like the Man of Steel, in some small way. But he, Clark, had known all along how she had felt about Superman; she would no doubt feel used, deceived. She could, and probably would, accuse him of abusing his position of trust as Clark to discover how she felt about his alter ego; of even trying, as Clark, to manipulate those feelings. And of that he was certainly guilty.

How he wished that he could just have swept Lois off somewhere private and talked all this out!

But that wasn't possible right now; he needed to find Luthor. He began to search again, more diligently this time, and after a few minutes his efforts were rewarded. Luthor was in the same black car, travelling back towards LexCorp. Clark decided to follow Luthor there, to see whether he could acquire any more incriminating evidence. After all, the man was hardly going to escape at this point.

After Clark left, Lois stood as if frozen. She felt as if her entire life had changed in the space of just fifteen minutes. The man she had thought she could trust - she had thought she could **love** - had been deceiving her. Untrustworthy, just like most men, she thought bleakly.

Clark is Superman.

Superman is really Clark Kent.

Which way around was it? Did it matter?

Either way, the man she had thought was Clark, her partner - her friend, the kind of friend she had never before had - just didn't exist. Instead, he was - what? An alien from outer space, a dead planet called Krypton. He wasn't human, he was Kryptonian, whatever that meant. And his name wasn't Clark, it was Kal-El.

And Clark had been lying to her for as long as she had known him - but then, she reminded herself, he had presumably been lying to everyone else who knew him as well. Like Perry, who thought that Clark was the most honest, decent person he knew - well, Perry was sure in for a surprise. And Jimmy Olsen, who thought that CK, as he called Clark, was a nice guy who was good company at a ball game or over a few beers. And what about Jack, Clark's young protege - was Clark deceiving him too? Probably, Lois thought with a twist of her lip.

And it was even worse than simply deceit, she mused bitterly. He had presented himself to her as two different men, and he had taken **advantage** of the fact that she believed him to be two men. He had had the... the **gall** to chastise her for being rude to his 'friend' Superman after she had interviewed him. She had revealed in the editorial conference the reasons for her mistrust of Superman, and

the Super-hero had been there the whole time, listening! He had even... it had been *Clark* who had taunted her, kissed her, after he'd rescued her from the mugger.

And yet... she frowned as she remembered other things. It had been Clark who had turned up at her apartment late one night, devastated and in a state of shock after the horrific explosion in Chicago. No wonder Superman had no-one in whom he could confide, when the one person everyone believed to be his friend was in fact his _alter ego_! It had also been Clark who had saved her the previous day when Nigel St John had pushed her off the Planet roof. She would be dead if it wasn't for Clark.

So what did this mean? He had asked her to wait until he could explain things to her - did she want him to? He had told her he had intended to tell her about his other identity himself - did she believe him? He had pleaded with her not to reveal his secret - was she going to?

The easy question first, Lois thought grimly. No, she wasn't going to tell anyone; at least, not yet. She rewound the cassette in the miniature recorder, and listened. Yes, the conversation with Luthor was on the tape, and there was sufficient detail to make it clear that he had intended to kill the two of them. And there were her shocked gasps, then the explosion; and, muffled by the sound of rushing wind and the flames engulfing the warehouse, was her exclamation of "You're Superman, aren't you?"

She rewound the tape, stopping it just before the incriminating remark; then she pressed 'Record', holding the button for a couple of minutes with the recording volume down to zero. Grimacing again - her evidence was gone for ever - she made her way to the nearest street and flagged down a passing taxi.

Inspector Henderson was extremely sceptical when Lois tried to explain that Lex Luthor had engaged in attempted murder. She wasn't surprised, she supposed; after all, Luthor's image was that of a successful and popular businessman. He also cultivated a reputation as a philanthropist, and certainly no hint of anything unsavoury had even been proven against him. Although, Lois remembered, Perry White had certainly believed that Luthor was capable of some pretty nasty stuff; if Perry thought that, why was Henderson so reluctant to believe her?

She had played the tape, and while he had listened to it a couple of times, taking notes as he did so, he seemed slow to accept that the third voice on the tape was Luthor's. Yes, of course, Lois realised that from his point of view it *could* merely be someone who sounded like Luthor; but why would she make it up? She wished Clark would hurry up and get back from whatever he was up to; Henderson would surely believe *him*!

"So how did you escape, then, since you were tied up with a bomb about to explode?" Henderson drawled.

She had prepared for this one. "Superman rescued us."

"Lucky he was in the area," the detective observed caustically.

Lois shrugged. "Clark's a friend of his - he told him where we were going."

"Oh - you thought there might be trouble?" Henderson enquired. "And why might you have thought that?"

"Clark's pretty cautious sometimes, I think," Lois said vaguely. "I haven't really known him that long... but anyway, I think he warned Superman to be on the look-out."

"And where's Kent now?" Henderson asked sharply.

Lois shrugged again. "He went off with Superman." < Well, *that* was certainly true!>

Henderson raised his eyebrows enquiringly. "After Luthor," Lois explained.

Henderson got to his feet and paced about the interview room. "You say Kent is cautious? Damn reckless, is my opinion! You're telling me he's gone after someone you say tried to kill the two of you - a ruthless, amoral swine like Luthor?" He took in Lois's amazed expression, and added quickly, "And I'll deny I ever said that, so be warned."

She grinned, recognising a worthy opponent. "Superman's with him, so I should think he'll be okay," she insisted, musing that there was probably nothing which could harm Clark. Although she had read about that strange green rock... she would have to ask him about that, always assuming that she decided to allow him a chance to explain.

Henderson finally took a full statement from Lois, accepted the tape as evidence, and let her go. It was too late to return to the Planet, and in any case Lois was unsure as to whether this latest development should be written up for the morning paper. It would be one hell of an exclusive - 'Lex Luthor tried to kill Planet journalists' - but suddenly the story was less of an issue. Getting enough evidence against Luthor to put him away was the real goal.

She took a taxi to her apartment, and tried to concentrate on assembling a story on the attempted murder in any case; even if she wasn't submitting it for the next day's paper, it would have to be written some time. But her thoughts kept returning to the issue which was foremost in her mind: Clark. Superman. Whoever he really was....

Eventually, she abandoned her attempts at framing a coherent account of events, and simply paced around the apartment, thinking. What did she want to do? Did she want to allow Clark to explain? Did she want to try to salvage something of their friendship, or had his deceit damaged it irrevocably? Could she ever trust him again?

She just wasn't sure. Nor was she actually sure which aspect of it hurt her most: that she had discovered that the Clark she knew was really Superman, someone she was on record as being suspicious of; that he had deceived her; or that she had been more than half-way to falling in love with a man who simply didn't exist.

Running her hands roughly through her hair, as if by that action she could wipe that uncomfortable thought from her mind, she threw herself onto her sofa and tried to tell herself that she never wanted to see Clark again. That would mean... no, he should be the one to leave the Planet, she would tell him. If he moved to another city, she would promise to keep his secret. No-one would find out that Superman and Clark Kent were one and the same person from *her*.

Angrily scrubbing tears from her eyes, she refused to accept that the thought of Clark leaving Metropolis upset her in any way.

Sometimes being Superman was more trouble than it was worth, reflected Clark as he strode into his apartment via the balcony. Even leaving aside the question of what he was going to do about Lois, the past few hours had been singularly unpleasant. He had followed Luthor back to the penthouse apartment, hovering overhead again with the intention of overhearing what transpired; if Luthor happened to say anything incriminating in respect of either the election fraud or to gun-running affair, Clark had intended to use that information to his advantage.

However, he had very quickly been distracted by the sound of emergency sirens; initially, he had ignored them, but his Super-hearing had quickly picked up the broadcasts on the emergency frequency which had informed him that there had been a nail-bomb explosion on the other side of the city. Some far-right terror group which had recently been launching a series of attacks on minority communities; this time they had struck in an area where gay people tended to congregate. It was Friday evening; people were out having a few beers and strolling around to celebrate the weekend. The explosion had caused devastation, had killed one man, and critically injured about half a dozen others. Many others were walking around with blood streaming from parts of their bodies; some with quite horrific injuries.

He had concurred with the police chief and paramedics about the cowardly nature of any person, or any organisation, which could plan and execute an attack of that nature; that, however, hadn't helped the victims. Superman had been kept busy for close to an hour, helping the police to clear the area, assisting the paramedics in assessing the seriousness of people's injuries, X-raying wounds so that he could tell the medics whether someone had broken bones, or whether a part of a nail was lodged inside someone's body. And all the time, Clark had been searching for some explanation, some logic behind the attack. Of course, he knew there was none; some deranged people seriously believed that by behaving in this manner, *somehow* the objects of their hate would just disappear, leave the country, go underground or something. That wouldn't happen, of course; the members of these minority groups were used to prejudice and hatred. They would become even more determined to resist it as a result. And the police - and Superman - were committed to finding those responsible, and seeing that they were punished.

When he had finally been able to leave the police and paramedics to cope, he had headed straight back to LexCorp. He had wondered whether

Lois's visit to Henderson would have had any effect: would Luthor by that time be under arrest? But it appeared not; the man was sitting at his over-large desk, puffing on a seriously over-large cigar. He had company; a slight man, clearly of Asian origin, in Western dress but wearing a turban. Clark had recognised this individual as the man who had also been with Luthor the previous evening. The two were discussing Lois, Clark had realised with a start. Wishing he still had his tape recorder, he had drifted lower in order to concentrate on the conversation.

"Unfortunately, we still need to acquire Ms Lane's material on the Congo affair." Luthor was saying grimly.

"I searched her apartment earlier today - I left no signs of entry, of course - but I could not find anything," his companion had replied.

Luthor had taken a long draw on his cigar before replying. "Yes, Nigel couldn't find anything either. Which, unfortunately, suggests to me that she must have moved them somewhere else. If I know anything about Ms Lane... the *late* Ms Lane," he had added, with a cynical, mirthless smile, "she would under no circumstances have destroyed them."

"That is certainly true," his companion had concurred. "If you wish, I can search her desk at the Daily Planet."

Luthor had appeared to consider for a moment or two. "I suppose that is a possibility. I also wondered about her relationship with her partner - Mr Kent. Regardless of the fact that they had not known each other very long, I gained the impression, when they were here, that he was attracted to her - he was certainly jealous of my admiration of her... qualities. It may be possible that they were more than partners."

"So I should also search Mr Kent's apartment?"

Getting to his feet, Luthor had replied, "Why not? But you had better be careful, Asabi. I should imagine Lane and Kent's bodies must have been discovered by now, and the police may be keeping watch on Kent's apartment."

The man called Asabi had bowed his head, his fingers pressed together in front of his chest. "As you wish. I have also arranged to take care of Mrs Leeson."

Leeson! It had then dawned on Clark that the disgraced mayor was no doubt, as far as Luthor was concerned, another loose end. Deciding that he had heard enough, he had landed on Luthor's balcony and strode into the penthouse office.

As he had later explained to Henderson, he had simply scooped up both Luthor and his accomplice Asabi and carried them off to the precinct. Luthor had protested about unlawful abduction during the entire journey, and once Clark had set the two on their feet at the precinct the head of LexCorp had produced his mobile phone and had proceeded to call his lawyer. The noise had brought several officers out into the foyer.

Henderson had then appeared from somewhere, and had drawled, "I was

wondering when you were going to show up, Superman. You send Lois Lane down here with some unbelievable story, and don't turn up yourself to corroborate it?"

Luthor had looked visibly shocked at the mention of Lois's name, and Henderson had smiled with, Clark thought, real enjoyment at that point as he had informed Luthor that both Lane and Kent had survived the explosion. At that point, Luthor had denied all knowledge of any explosion, and had continued to do so despite being informed that Lois had given a statement and that there was also a tape recording. Clark had promised to provide a statement himself - as Superman - and had also undertaken to ensure that Clark would provide a statement as soon as possible. He had then left Luthor and Asabi in police custody, with Henderson's assurance that even if Luthor's lawyer managed to secure his release from custody, it wouldn't happen before morning.

At that point, Clark had gone in search of Patricia Leeson. He was of course aware that she had not been the one who had called him at the Planet offering a meeting; that had been a trick. He hoped that he would find her at her home; he had decided that if she was there and was all right, he would talk to her as Clark. He had been aware that he needed to warn her that she was in danger from whatever Asabi had 'arranged' for her, but he also wanted to persuade her to make a statement implicating Luthor.

However, when he had arrived at her town house, it had been immediately obvious that he was too late. On scanning the living-room, he had seen the former mayor lying on the floor, her hand clutched to her throat. A tumbler lay on the floor by her side. He had landed and entered the house through the - unlocked - back door; no-one else was home. Of course, he had thought, remembering his research notes, Leeson was a divorcee. He had crouched over her body; she was dead. Poison, he had guessed, contemplating the contorted expression on her face. He had pressed his fingers into the carpet next to where the tumbler lay, and sniffed the liquid which he found: whiskey, laced with cyanide.

Someone had clearly not cared that this death would be identified as murder, Clark had thought grimly. There had been no attempt to present it as suicide - why would someone commit suicide with cyanide? It was a horrible drug, leading to an extremely painful death. Anyone committing suicide might take an overdose of painkillers, or would stick their head in a gas oven, or inhale their car's exhaust emission. Hardly cyanide; and anyway, it was not a very widely available drug.

He had called Henderson, and waited for the detective's arrival. That had delayed Clark almost another hour, because once Henderson had arrived he had needed to explain to the detective what he had overheard Luthor and Asabi say in relation to Leeson, and he had then helped to search for evidence of another person having been in the house. Some fingerprints had been found, although Clark secretly thought that Asabi, or whoever had drugged the whiskey, would not have been careless enough to leave prints. He had discovered that there was cyanide in the whiskey decanter; therefore the poisoner would not have had to be in the house at the same time as the mayor... former mayor.

< Something else to add to the list of questions Henderson will have

for Luthor> Clark now reflected as he changed at human speed from his Super-suit to a pair of black jeans and a casual shirt; for some reason he didn't quite understand, he was delaying the moment when he would have to go over to Lois's place and find out whether she was even willing to speak to him.

This was not a day he would want to repeat, that was for sure, he mused bleakly. The trap, the bomb; Lois discovering his secret identity in a way he had certainly not wanted; the nail-bomb and the injuries that had caused; and the death of Patricia Leeson, whom he was now very sure had been something of a dupe. Not innocent by any means; but certainly not the leader in the plot. She had been a puppet-mayor, whose strings had been pulled by Luthor.

But untangling that relationship will have to wait until tomorrow, Clark told himself. Right now, I need to deal with Lois....

Lois glanced at her watch; it was well after 9pm, and she told herself that Clark was obviously not going to turn up now, despite his earlier promises. She assured herself fiercely that she didn't really care whether he did nor not; it was irrelevant now. Nothing he could say would alter the fact of what he had done, and therefore she didn't actually want to talk to him. Biting her lip, she tried to stop herself remembering that earlier brief conversation in the taxi on the way back to the Planet, when he had told her that he cared for her very much; tried to ignore her memories of their shared kisses, and how she had felt when he had taken her into his arms. None of that had been based on anything *real*, she insisted to herself. The Clark she had thought she had known was a man of straw, a fake.

Tears springing to her eyes, not for the first time since her shock discovery, she angrily brushed them away and padded into the kitchen in search of comfort food. She found chocolate chip cookies and Clark bars; the latter she grabbed and flung into the trash. Carrying a glass of milk and some cookies with her, she returned to the living room and curled up on the couch, trying to banish thoughts of Clark and Superman.

A few minutes later she was disturbed by knocking on her door. She hesitated; what if this was Clark: did she want to see him? But curiosity won out over her desire to ignore him: she would listen to what he had to say now, and she could avoid him from here on. Besides, she wanted to know what had happened to Luthor: there had been nothing on the evening news on TV.

Clark stood on the other side of the door as she opened it, dressed in a black shirt and jeans and a pale beige linen jacket. < He *must* know how good he looks in black> she thought resentfully as she stood back to allow him to enter. He still looked exactly like the Clark she had known... thought she had known. For some reason she couldn't quite understand, she had almost expected him to look different now that she knew the truth.

His expression was wary, apprehensive - as well it might be, she thought grimly. He had to know how she felt about his deception - and if he was also worried about what she intended to do with the

information, then that was just fine by her! Let him worry.

"Lois? Are... are you okay?" He sounded concerned. Somehow, this wasn't what Lois had expected his first enquiry to be. 'Are you still angry', perhaps; 'will you keep my secret', certainly; 'forgive me', definitely. She frowned at him.

This was going to be difficult, Clark thought with an inward grimace. Yet again, his real identity, the fact that he was an alien from outer space, was having the effect of wrecking a relationship which meant a great deal to him. He glanced down at his feet, not wanting to see the condemnation in Lois's eyes. But his conscience prodded him: was it the fact that he was from Krypton which had caused Lois's adverse reaction, or the fact that he had not told her? Probably the latter, he admitted to himself.

He tried again. "Lois, can we talk, please?"

He heard her take a deep breath, and he looked up to meet her eyes. Hers were stormy, unwelcoming. She gestured towards one of the sofas, taking the other herself; she hadn't offered him a drink, he realised. Not that he wanted one, but it was a sure sign that he wasn't exactly a welcome guest.

She glanced across at him again and asked, in a businesslike tone, "Did you find Luthor?"

< Okay, so that's the way you want to play it, Lois> Clark thought sadly. "Yeah, I got him. It took me a while - I don't know if you saw the news, but there was another nail-bomb tonight...."

"Oh!" she cut across him. "Yeah, I saw that, but - you were there?" She was surprised; although she had seen the devastation on the news, for some reason there had been no mention of Superman.

"Yeah, for about an hour. It was pretty horrible."

"Sick," Lois agreed. "All those people, just minding their own business...."

"Yeah," Clark agreed. Their eyes met again, and for an instant there was a shared understanding, before Lois broke eye contact again and stared down at her hands.

"Luthor?" she prompted.

He sighed deeply. "Okay. Yeah, I got him - and an accomplice. Name of Asabi - you ever come across him?" He looked across at Lois for confirmation, but she shook her head. "I heard them planning to search my place and the Planet for your gun-running files, which looks to me like confirmation that Luthor was involved. And you might want to know that Asabi searched this place earlier today."

Her head shot up. "He was *here*?" She looked alarmed, horrified at the thought that a stranger had again invaded her home.

"Yeah," Clark confirmed quietly. "Looking for your files - of course he found nothing 'cause they're at my place still."

Lois got to her feet and began to pace the room agitatedly; the

thought that someone had been rummaging through her belongings again made her feel ill. Clark stood and moved to her side, noticing to his dismay that she immediately moved a little way away from him. "Lois? What is it?" he enquired in concern.

She shrugged. "I just wish the villains of Metropolis would quit using my apartment as a training ground for breaking and entering!"

Clark thought he understood at least one of Lois's concerns. Quietly and without fuss, he removed his glasses and inspected the apartment, moving into the kitchen and then the bedroom to finish his examination. He could see nothing unusual or out of place, and - not that he was surprised - there were no new fingerprints. He returned to the living-room and turned to face Lois as he replaced his glasses; she was eyeing him curiously.

"It's all clean, Lois - I can't see anything wrong."

She stared at him suddenly. "You *knew* Nigel had booby-trapped that lamp?"

Clark shook his head. "No. I just thought he might have rigged up something, and I didn't have time to check out the entire apartment - and anyway, if I'd found something, I couldn't exactly have explained it."

"No...." Lois conceded. She marched back to her seat and faced him with an accusatory stare. "So - you were bringing me up to date on Luthor."

Clark sighed in a resigned manner and joined her in the seating area. So she was avoiding the discussion about him - about them - and just wanted to deal with non-personal issues. Okay... he could deal with that, for the moment. It might actually remind her how well they worked together, he mused hopefully.

He explained that Luthor and Asabi were in custody being questioned, and that he needed to provide statements both from himself and Superman. Then he suddenly remembered the other big news, and slapped himself on the forehead in frustration at his forgetfulness.

"Sorry - I should have told you. Leeson's dead."

"Dead?" Lois exclaimed. "How?"

Clark shrugged. "I've no proof, but I did hear Asabi say that he had made certain arrangements concerning her, so I'd be able to hazard a guess as to who was responsible... She was poisoned. I could smell it in her whiskey - cyanide."

Lois grimaced. "Hell of a way to go."

"You're telling me," Clark agreed. "You should have seen her face... on second thoughts, I'm just as glad you didn't."

Lois glared at him. "I'm a reporter - I write about murder all the time. I don't need protecting, by you or anyone!"

Clark threw out his arm in an impatient gesture. "I'm not trying to

'protect' you - if you must know, I'd prefer not to have seen her myself!"

Lois shrugged. "Okay - well, if she's dead, then we need to get on to the night editor *now* - this is big news!"

But Clark shook his head. "Already taken care of - I phoned it in while I was at Leeson's place waiting for Henderson to show up. It's just a skeleton story for now, reporting that Superman found her dead and that the police are treating it as suspicious. I know we have the cause of death, but I thought we should wait for the lab reports - and I want to keep some of this stuff quiet for now." At Lois's questioning glance, he added, "I didn't want to give our competitors too much to go on - and I still want to see if we can get any further with tying all of this to Luthor. The less we reveal that we know, the more chance we have."

That made sense, Lois thought. "So what have we got? Luthor trying to kill us - that should be easy enough to verify. Can Superman testify about what he - you - overheard Luthor and this Asabi saying?"

< That's good - she's talking about Superman as me> Clark thought. "I can - I already told Henderson about it, and I promised to make a full statement later. I don't know how much we can use for the Planet, though - we might have to hold back on that for a while."

"That's not a problem - we've got plenty to fill up the front page right now," Lois commented. "But we need to tie him to the election fraud and my gun-running story."

Clark frowned. "With Leeson dead, I'm not sure how we'll make the link there. Sure, I heard Asabi talk about 'making arrangements' to 'take care of' her - but that still doesn't prove any link to the attempt to fix the election. As for the gun-running - again, what I overheard helps, but unless Luthor actually confesses, I'm not sure where we go from here, although the gun-running scam does explain his motive for trying to kill you - but not me." He paused, then continued, "Course, the cops will get a search warrant and they'll probably tear his place apart, but if my guess is right Luthor will have made sure there's no incriminating evidence anywhere."

Lois's brain was ticking over frantically. "Okay, I guess you're right there, but he must have records somewhere! And what if the DA offers Asabi a plea-bargain - you think he'd go for it?"

Clark grimaced. "I have no idea. But so far it doesn't look as if any of Luthor's associates would testify against him - St John committed suicide rather than be questioned about his links with Luthor. And I think Leeson was terrified of whoever was pulling her strings, and she wasn't about to implicate anyone else."

"We *have* to be able to pin more on him!" Lois insisted.

Clark grinned briefly, without real humour. "We've got him for attempted murder of the two of us. Though of course if we can prove the gun-running link, then there's several attempted murders in addition."

"And one actual murder," Lois pointed out. "Pete - remember? And he

did seem to confirm on the tape I gave Henderson that he'd been involved with the recent attempts to kill me."

"Yeah - sorry," Clark acknowledged. "Though since Luthor himself didn't fire the shot which killed Pete, it'd count as conspiracy to commit murder, I guess. And if we can prove a link to Leeson's death, we'll probably find someone else was paid to do that too. At any rate, Asabi said he had taken care of it."

She sighed. "Okay, well I guess we'll have to start trying to piece it all together tomorrow." They would, she acknowledged - but how did that fit with her decision not to work with Clark any more? Her resolve that he would have to leave the Planet?

Well... they'd have to wrap up these investigations first, she conceded.

Clark inhaled deeply, searching for the courage to broach the subject Lois had so studiously been avoiding. "Lois, can we talk? About... about me - Superman? About... us?"

Lois avoided his searching gaze, instead reaching for her glass of milk and sipping from it in an attempt to buy herself time. What did she want? She wasn't exactly sure. She did want to talk about things - she really wanted to be able to yell at Clark and tell him exactly how she felt. But a part of her wanted to avoid the entire subject, wanted to avoid letting Clark know just how close he had come to invading her heart, gaining her trust and love. < If you love someone, you give them power over you...> she thought bleakly.

"Lois?" His voice was insistent. "Look, we can't just ignore what happened...."

She glared at him. "What's up, Superman? Worried I've splashed your secret across the front page of the morning edition?"

Clark closed his eyes briefly. He had guessed that this would be a difficult discussion, but **this** difficult.... He sighed. "Lois, I didn't think you'd do that - at least, if you had done, then you wouldn't be the person I've come to know and trust over the past couple of weeks."

"Oh yeah?" she flung at him. "You say you trust me not to do that, but you don't trust me enough to tell me the truth about you!"

Clark rolled his eyes. "Lois, I **told** you earlier that I'd already intended to tell you. I just didn't get a chance - I didn't plan on Luthor deciding to try to blow us up!"

"And how am I supposed to believe that?" Lois demanded angrily. "After all, I now know that I can't believe most of what you've told me since we met!"

He glared at her. "Lois, I have **never** lied to you. Okay, there was something I didn't tell you, but you have to admit that it's not exactly the sort of thing I'd want to broadcast...."

She cut across him. "I'm not suggesting you go on LNN and tell the

whole of Metropolis! But...."

"But *what*, Lois? I should have told *you*?" he demanded in return. If she wanted grovelling apologies for keeping his identity secret, he was *not* going to oblige. He had already decided that he needed to tell her, and it hadn't been his fault that events had overtaken him. "When, exactly? When we first met? 'Oh hi, Lois, I'm Clark Kent - oh, and I'm also Superman, it's a sort of sideline of mine....' - like that, you mean?"

Lois glared. "Of course not! But the last few days... you *deceived* me! I thought we were... friends, and all the time you were keeping something *that* big from me! I just bet you were laughing at me behind my back the whole time!"

Clark's jaw dropped in disbelief. "Lois, if you really think that... I don't know what I can say to convince you, but I have *really* wanted to tell you, since yesterday, when I couldn't explain why I wasn't able to spend the evening with you." He sighed deeply again, getting to his feet and beginning to pace the room in frustration. "We *are* friends - at least, I hope we still can be... but Lois, there are friends I have had for *years* who don't know about me. You are only the second person I have ever thought about telling."

She blinked and stared abruptly at him. "Who else... oh, of course. Lana?"

He nodded. "Lana was my fiancée. And we were close friends since high school. When I started developing these weird powers, I had to have someone to talk to, or else I'd have gone mad. My parents were dead by then... there was only Lana."

That much made sense. "And how did she react?" Some instinct told Lois what to expect in response, and she held her breath.

It was no surprise that Clark's expression darkened. "She... wasn't pleased. She never... never really accepted all that stuff about me - she just wanted me to be *normal*, and as hard as I tried I just couldn't be. I could never see someone in trouble and not do what I could to help them."

Something sounded very familiar about this explanation; Lois remembered a conversation at his apartment, the evening her place was burgled - which was also the night they had kissed for the first time, if she ignored Superman's kiss. She met his gaze and asked, "So was that what she wanted to change about you?"

He nodded wordlessly, bowing his head to stare at his feet. Those years, growing up and discovering new powers all the time, had been so hard; made even harder, he now realised with hindsight, by Lana's constant disapproval.

Lois watched him for a few moments, trying to work out how she felt about the situation. Did she want to pursue the conversation, or was it time to ask him to leave? Where did she want them to go from here, if anywhere?

Clark raised his face and met her gaze again. "Yeah, Lana didn't want me to do... Super things. And when I actually became Superman, that's when she left for good."

"Okay, Clark, but you must have realised that I'm nothing like Lana!" Lois protested.

"No?" He quirked an eyebrow at her. "You weren't exactly a fan of Superman either. I had no idea how you'd react."

"I was doing my *job*, Clark - as a reporter. I was *investigating*. You have heard of that...?"

"Don't be sarcastic, Lois," Clark chided her. "It doesn't help here." He glanced down at his hands before continuing. "Look, Lois, we have known each other for *two weeks*. For most of that time, you've had a real downer on Superman - can you really blame me for not telling you?"

Lois ignored the reference to her views on Superman. "Yeah, I know it's only been a couple of weeks. But you tell me something, Clark - or whatever your name is -"

"My name *is* Clark," he interrupted her, speaking in a quiet but intense voice.

"You told me it was Kal-El," she pointed out.

He sighed again; he seemed to be doing a lot of that. "My birth name is Kal-El. But when the Kents found me... well, they named me Clark, and that's who I've been ever since I can remember."

< So that's the answer to my question about when Superman arrived on earth> Lois thought idly. < When he was a baby - or a very small child, at most> She faced him again. "Tell me - does it seem like only two weeks to you?"

He blinked. "Huh?"

"We've only known each other two weeks - sure. But does it seem longer to you?"

Clark held his breath momentarily; he sensed that this moment could be crucial. He decided that it was time to lay his cards on the table. "Lois, almost from the moment I met you I felt as if I'd known you my whole life. It makes no difference to me whether we've known each other two days, two weeks, two years... I know what you mean to me."

Lois met his gaze, and what she saw in his eyes shocked her to the core. Clark had laid his feelings bare in front of her; it was evident from the naked need in his gaze that he... cared for her very much. More than cared....

She hesitated. Was she prepared to take the risk... to meet him half-way and be honest about her own feelings for him? She opened her mouth to begin speaking, but then thought again. What if he was still deceiving her about something? Could she trust him? Did she want to take the risk... was she ready to forgive him?

She turned away, the expression in Clark's eyes making her uncomfortable. Deciding to ignore the part of his response which referred to his feelings for her, she threw back, "So - you felt it

too, this... *sense* that we just seemed to *know* each other. That's been there since we met. And you say it was too soon to tell me you're Superman?"

"There's a... a *connection* between us, Lois," Clark replied, staring at her intently even though she wasn't meeting his gaze. "We both felt it." He paused, then added, "Okay, I probably still wouldn't have told you about Superman much sooner, but you have to admit that your attitude made it much harder for me. How could I tell you I was him, when you were making it so clear you disliked the guy and how he - I - operated? When you were accusing me of sexual harassment?" he finished on an incredulous note.

Lois glared at him. "So why did you kiss me like that - in such a darned macho way - if you didn't want me to form a bad impression?"

He sighed again. "Actually, I have no idea, Lois. As soon as I flew off I cursed myself for having done it. But this isn't getting us anywhere...."

Lois shrugged. "No, it isn't. But if you're looking for me to forgive you and pretend I'm not... not mad at you, and that I don't care that you deceived me - or even pretend that I could feel the same way about you now that I know you're not who I thought you were... well, that's just not going to happen."

Clark closed his eyes briefly, despairingly. "Lois, I'm still the same person. I'm still Clark Kent...."

"No, you're not, you're Superman in disguise!" she retorted.

He shook his head firmly. "No, you've got that the wrong way around, Lois. I'm Clark Kent. Superman's the disguise." He paused to let that sink in, then added. "You said earlier you'd suspected Superman had a secret identity - I don't know if that's true, but in any case, it's the other way around. Superman is the secret identity. *I* am Clark."

This time, she looked at him. "But you wear glasses - it's obvious you don't need them...."

"No, I don't - at least, not for the reason you think. I wear them because, when I was growing up and learning to control my powers, wearing glasses was the only way to make sure that I didn't trip my heat vision or X-ray capabilities by mistake. I have to move the glasses out of the way to use those powers."

She was still, listening to his explanation; encouraged, he continued. "I know you might say the costume's not much of a disguise - I know I thought so myself at first. But without my glasses and with my hair brushed back I do look different. And the other advantage is that since I don't wear a mask or anything else to disguise myself, no-one actually suspects that Superman has any other identity. To my knowledge, you're the only person who ever did suspect."

"I did suspect a secret identity," Lois told him, not liking the implicit suggestion that she might have made it up to save face somehow. "I even made some notes on it before I finished my article -

no, I didn't put it in the article!" she added quickly as an expression of alarm crossed Clark's face. "I've been thinking through the secret identity thing for a few days now - I even thought of asking you about it. I figured that if there was one, you'd probably know. More fool me, it never even occurred to me that he *was* you."

Clark acknowledged this with a wry smile; he understood what that concession meant to Lois Lane, the best investigative journalist of her generation. "Look, Lois, Perry's always told me you're the best darned reporter he's known. I've only known you a couple of weeks and I know you're good. No-one has ever before got as close to figuring out Superman as you have, and with a bit more time I dare say you'd have worked it out for yourself. It probably wouldn't have taken you more than... oh, a couple of years?" he finished with a teasing grin.

"Hah!! Try a week!" she retorted. "I was *this* close!" she added, holding up her thumb and index finger to demonstrate.

Clark moved swiftly back over towards where Lois still sat, and seated himself opposite her, leaning across to reduce the distance between them. "Lois, we probably won't agree about whether I should have told you before now. I can only swear to you that I was intending to tell you this evening. Can we please put it behind us and move on?"

But she was shaking her head. "Move on to what, Clark? Everything's changed - it's not just that you didn't tell me. You're something - someone - I never expected. I don't know whether we can move on from here." Seeing his expression, which suggested that he was about to plead his cause further, she continued quickly. "Look, before you came over here this evening I'd decided I didn't want to see you again. I was going to ask you to quit the Planet and move to another city...."

"Threatening to reveal my secret if I refused?" he enquired in a dangerous tone.

She bowed her head; Clark took that as an admission. He got to his feet again, angry and dispirited. The shuttered and bitter expression on his face was not one which Lois had seen her partner wear before; even a few days earlier, when they had argued about her Superman interview, he had not seemed this... bleak, distant. As if he had realised that there was no hope left for him.

"I think you're right, Lois - there is no point discussing this any further. Obviously you can't live with the fact that I'm an alien from another planet - well, that's nothing new to me. But you know what?" he threw at her as he walked towards the door. "I think your real problem isn't whether I'm Clark or Superman. I think you're afraid. You don't want to take any risks. Well, life isn't risk-free, Lois, and if you want to be happy, if you want to fall in love, you have to take a few risks. I was prepared to do that. I hoped you were too."

< Coward... coward...> The word hung in the air between them, even though Clark hadn't used it. Lois stared down at her hands, twisting together in her lap. She heard the door of her apartment open, then close silently as Clark's footsteps receded softly down the hall.

He had been a fool to think it could work, Clark told himself as he took off from the alley close to Lois's building. He was too different; he wasn't human. Lana had made it perfectly clear that no earth woman would want someone like him, an alien. Why should he have expected that Lois would be any different?

And it wasn't as if he hadn't had warning. Lois's attitude to Superman had been very clear. He should never have allowed himself to forget that, to imagine that once she knew the truth, that Clark was also Superman, she would just accept it.

And Lois herself... as he had said to her, she was afraid to trust. From what she had told him, and from what he had observed of her, she had experienced too little real love in her life. All the people she had cared about had betrayed her trust in some way; had used her, or just never been there for her when she had needed them. She wasn't at all close to her parents, and although she seemed to keep in regular contact with her sister, they weren't on intimate terms. And his conversation with Lois over dinner a few days earlier had shown him that she had very few friends - most of her friends were, in fact, work colleagues. She also seemed to look back on past boyfriends as mistakes. It was no wonder she didn't seem able, or willing, to take the leap of faith required to become romantically involved with a man. It would be harder still for her where the man concerned had already been caught out in deceit.

He should forget all thoughts of a relationship with Lois, Clark told himself. It just wasn't going to happen. That conviction he had felt when he had first seen her in the newsroom... it must have been just wishful thinking.

He sighed as he propelled himself even faster, higher, up above the clouds where the air was thinner and the temperature lower. Perhaps Lois was right: maybe he should leave Metropolis. He was fairly sure that she would keep his secret, despite the implicit threat which he had actually not believed she had meant, but could he really carry on working at the Planet, day after day, seeing her, having to speak to her about work, and not think about these heady two weeks when they had seemed to be falling in love? Could he possibly work with her and ignore the fact that he *was* actually in love with her?

He grimaced; he couldn't imagine putting himself through that exquisite torture. Be her colleague, when he wanted to be her friend? Be her partner, when he wanted to be her lover? It was more than any man - even a Kryptonian - should be asked to cope with.

How did Kryptonians cope with relationships, Clark wondered idly as he drifted in the night sky. Did they fall in love? Did they mate for life? His father and mother had looked as if they were in love. Had his father faced the same problems as Clark now faced when selecting his partner? Or had Lara fallen in love with Jor-El simultaneously?

But he couldn't ask them; nor could he talk to Jonathan and Martha Kent. *They* would have understood, Clark felt sure; just as they would have understood what he had gone through as a teenager when his

powers had developed. How he wished he could call them, talk this through with them; but that wasn't possible.

All the same... He changed course suddenly, and headed west, towards Kansas. Towards Smallville....

As the sound of Clark's footsteps faded, Lois collapsed back on the sofa again and burst into tears. She felt as if something very precious to her had been just within her grasp, and she had lost it.

Clark... just a few short hours ago, she had been expecting him to tell her that he was falling in love with her, that he wanted them to start dating exclusively. She would have welcomed that, had suspected that she was falling in love with him. But it was all an illusion....

Did it really matter that he was Superman? He had thrown that at her just before he had left.

Drying her eyes, she switched off the lights and locked her door before padding into the bedroom and shedding her clothes, pulling on a nightshirt. She moved to the bathroom and scrubbed her teeth, all the while powerless to prevent their conversation replaying itself over and over in her head. Did it matter? What difference did it make if Clark was from Krypton? Okay, he could do some things normal men - human men - couldn't do; okay, a *lot* of things. But did that matter? He looked like a man. He felt like a man. Dammit, he even *kissed* like a man. And she was pretty sure that he functioned like a man in other important respects as well. So did it make any difference?

There was the fact that he hadn't told her; that had hurt. But as she returned to her bedroom and slid into bed, her conscience prodded her. Was it that she felt he should have confided in her; or was she embarrassed about the things she had said about Superman in Clark's presence? She had been quite caustic, she remembered. And that interview... she covered her face in horror. It was no wonder Clark had called her unprofessional. She *had* been unprofessional, and the thought that her partner had witnessed the entire episode was humiliating. Was that behind her reluctance to forgive him?

But even if that was part of it, she insisted, the fact that Clark was really Kal-El from Krypton did make a difference. He wasn't the same person she had started to consider as her best friend. Everything had changed... the fact that Clark was the man who had, only a few days earlier, been digging survivors out of a ruined building in Chicago was a highly daunting proposition to take in. He could *fly*. He could lift entire railway carriages in his bare hand. He could see through things... he could take the force of explosions into his own body. How could a man like that be satisfied with an ordinary woman who couldn't do any of that stuff?

< Because when's the last time you saw any Kryptonian women around here?> Lois's inner voice enquired caustically.

She grimaced, burrowing further under the covers. She *didn't* want Clark, she insisted. It didn't matter what he wanted; he'd blown it

by not telling her about himself. It just proved that she couldn't trust him.

< But that's just an excuse, isn't it?> that little voice taunted her again. < Like he said, you're a coward. Finding out that Clark deceived you just gave you an excuse not to take the risk of a relationship with him>

< No!> Lois protested. < It's not like that....>

< But it is> the voice of her conscience pointed out. < That's exactly what it is>

< And if I don't want to take risks... what's wrong with that? What's wrong with not wanting to be hurt, not wanting to give someone the chance to let me down yet again? If it means I have to be alone, so what? At least I can trust *me* not to hurt me!>

But, lying awake in bed, Lois eventually conceded that she could at least understand why Clark hadn't told her that he was Superman. It probably had nothing to do with not trusting her, she acknowledged wryly. He had given her all the clues to understand that one.

Growing up with Super-powers had been very hard for him, made worse by his adoptive parents' early deaths. His only confidant had been the woman he had nearly married; the woman who had wanted him to be something he was not. Lana had made Clark very unhappy, Lois guessed. He hadn't said as much, but his manner whenever she was mentioned gave the truth away. She had tried to change him, attempted to lay down rules as to what he could and could not do. She had never supported or encouraged him, never helped him to understand or live with his powers. Instead, her attitude had been that the powers, and who he really was, were things to be suppressed or ignored. And yet, as he had told her, he had been unable to see someone in trouble and refuse to help.

Lana had left for good the day he became Superman, he had told her. That had been an extremely revealing remark. The only other person who knew about Clark's true nature had hated that aspect of him - had probably presented him with a choice between her and his Super-powers. It was no wonder he so badly wanted to be accepted as Clark Kent, rather than Kal-El or Superman, Lois realised. Lana must have hurt him very badly, destroyed his confidence in himself as who he really was. It was a wonder that he had ever found the courage and determination to become the Man of Steel.

And now, another woman knew the truth about Clark Kent's relationship with Superman; and she too had rejected him. Lois felt guilt flood through her at this thought. Knowing, and understanding, Clark's history as she now did, she understood how her rejection must have hurt him; she remembered with a pang his expression and tone of voice as he'd made his parting remark. It also occurred to her that, having been rejected before, it must have taken a great deal of courage for Clark to contemplate a romantic relationship with herself. She understood something else as well: why he was so determined to keep his identity a secret. If the only person - people - who knew he was Superman had rejected him, he was probably afraid that everyone who found out would behave in the same way.

But that couldn't be true, Lois rationalised. After all, the way the media - especially the tabloids - treated Superman suggested that Clark would be mobbed if everyone knew who he was. Women would be falling over themselves to get to him. He would be the most popular guy in Metropolis. He would....

He wouldn't have a *life*.

That thought struck Lois with the force of lightning. No, Clark would not have a life of his own. He would be followed wherever he went; bad guys would know exactly where to find him if they wanted to get at him; his friends and work colleagues would be at risk at the hands of people who wanted to force him to do things they wanted. His life would be destroyed.

And that was why Lois would never tell another soul what she had discovered.

She hadn't really been thinking of doing it, she assured her conscience quickly. All right, there had been that unspoken threat - which Clark had picked up on, and which had clearly angered him - that she would reveal his secret if he didn't follow her wishes. But she had not really intended to follow that through. She grimaced; Clark probably didn't realise that she hadn't meant it. She would have to tell him when she saw him.

Tomorrow. She would see him tomorrow, at the Planet. They would still be working together - they had no choice until the loose ends of their investigations had been wrapped up. But after that....

After that... who knows, Lois thought. Can I carry on working with Clark, knowing that we came so close to being more than partners - more than friends, even? How easy will it be to go back to a working relationship only?

It can be done, she insisted. It will have to work. There's no other way.

Clark sat hunched over his kitchen table, a mug of coffee in one hand and Saturday's edition of the Daily Planet spread out in front of him. He had never felt less like getting ready for work: the thought of going in to the Planet, having to work closely with Lois wrapping up their current investigations, was almost too much to contemplate. He briefly considered calling in sick; it almost wasn't an exaggeration, he thought glumly. He was certainly heart-sick, and also very tired: he had spent almost the entire night in Smallville, sitting beside his parents' grave for part of the time, and the remainder hovering up in the clouds above the old farmhouse, now owned by strangers.

But he wouldn't do that. Apart from anything else, Lois would think he was a coward, and Clark didn't want that. He certainly had no intention of pretending to her that he wasn't in the least affected by what had happened, but he didn't want her to guess at just how devastated he was. After all, as they had both reminded each other, they had only known each other for two weeks. To observers, that would be barely long enough to form a friendship. And yet, it had been more than long enough for Clark to fall irrevocably in love.

He *couldn't* be mistaken in his impression that Lois felt something for him too, could he? He had felt sure that she had the night they had kissed, although of course sexual attraction didn't have to have anything to do with love. But then they had gone out to dinner and she had clearly enjoyed his company, had confided in him in ways which, she had told him, she had never done before. *And* she had been disappointed when he had left without any repeat of the kisses of the other evening. Then there had been that brief exchange in the taxi, earlier the previous day... he had given a very strong hint of his feelings for her, and for an instant she had looked delighted; there had been an expression in her eyes which had suggested that she reciprocated his sentiments. But then she had looked away, and he had concluded that perhaps she wasn't quite ready to trust her instincts about the two of them.

If only he had managed to tell her about his disguise before Luthor laid that trap for them, he mused. But then, he had already been over this 'if only,' several times during his long night in Smallville. And anyway, he strongly suspected that his failure to tell her about Superman was not the most important reason behind her rejection of him. The fact that he had deceived her was clearly relevant; but more important, he thought, was her own inability to believe that any man - perhaps any person - would really be trusted not to let her down. And as well as that, the fact that he was from another planet was certainly a turn-off.

Was she, even now, squirming with horror at the realisation that she had allowed an alien to touch her? That she had willingly kissed him? Had she taken a long, hot shower after he'd left the previous evening, as if to wash him off her? Clark closed his eyes as his entire body shuddered. < Please, Lois, don't be disgusted by me... you don't have to love me, if you can't, but... don't hate me....>

Disgusted at himself, he sighed and forced himself to concentrate on the paper. The lead item on the front page was his story about Mayor Leeson's death; there was little additional information apart from what he had called in, but the article he and Lois had prepared earlier about her arrest on charges of attempting to rig the election was also on the front page. The night editor had clearly tweaked it a little to adjust to the fact that it now referred to a dead woman. Lower down the page was an article about the nail bomb attack, leading to an interview with Superman on an inside page; Clark had also called that one in.

Turning to the weekend supplement, he found their interview with Luthor; that would have particular significance now, Clark realised, given Luthor's arrest. The Planet would no doubt be leading with the arrest in that evening's edition. He turned to the centre pages, and his heart-rate quickened. There was Lois's interview with Superman!

He forced himself to read it at normal speed, although he was sorely tempted to Super-speed read it in order to check that she hadn't included anything which might have been incriminating. But she had assured him that she hadn't mentioned her suspicions about a secret identity, and he wasn't worried about anything she might have criticised him for.

It was a good article - no, scrub that, he thought, it was a great article. It was the kind of profile that he himself would have liked to do on Superman, except that it would have involved the kind of close association of himself with the Super-hero which he tried to avoid if he could; although, he supposed, calling in two interviews with the man on the previous evening wouldn't help him there. Lois had certainly not written a paeon of praise for his alter ego, but nor had she done a hatchet job. What stared at him from the centre pages of the Planet was a thoughtful, considered analysis of a semi-omnipotent Super-hero with a vulnerable, almost human soul. Yes, she had understood him better than anyone else ever had; even better than he understood himself, he realised. He remembered their brief discussion on the way to work a few mornings ago, when she had remarked that the **idea** of Superman was almost more important than what he could actually do; this thought that Superman gave hope to Metropolis was also discussed in the article, and as Clark re-read it he felt a sense of wonderment at Lois's ability to put things in real perspective. If he had ever thought about stopping being Superman, that article would have banished any such thoughts from his mind.

But if Lois understood him - Superman - so well, why did she see the fact that he, Clark, was Superman as such a problem? She understood why he had to do what he did; that was obvious. She must be able to work out for herself why keeping his disguise a secret was so necessary. Therefore she must be able to figure out why he hadn't told her.

And never, at any point in the entire article, did she say anything which gave the faintest impression that the fact that he was Kryptonian and not human mattered in the slightest. She dealt with his alienness only insofar as it was relevant to the article, repeating what was already known about his origins and raising, in passing, the question of how long he had been on Earth. No suggestion that as an alien he should be an outcast. Clark had encountered such views before in his role as Superman; it wasn't just Lana who didn't like the idea of aliens from outer space. There had been the occasional journalist, government agent.... It was racist, Clark mused thoughtfully, although he supposed that the definition of minority ethnic origin didn't quite cover planets outside the Solar System.

But perhaps Lois was only bothered about his being Kryptonian to the degree that it affected her personally; maybe she had no difficulty with being rescued by Superman, but didn't want to be intimate with him?

This was getting him nowhere, Clark decided, getting abruptly to his feet and heading for his bedroom. It was time to get ready for work; there was little point in putting off the moment when he saw Lois again. He sighed; he was a professional, and so was she. They could cope with working together; their personal lives would have to be put on one side. Indefinitely, perhaps... or at least, for as long as Clark could cope with sublimating his feelings.

After a largely sleepless night, Lois dressed in running shorts, trainers and a loose sweat top, and went out jogging at 6 am in the

vain hope that the mindless activity would help to clear her brain. It didn't, and she returned home half an hour later having picked up a couple of pastries and a copy of the Planet en route. Making a pot of strong coffee, she spread the paper out on her dining table and studied the main news items.

Clark had indeed been busy the previous evening, she noticed with a wry grimace. Three stories in all on the front page. She frowned in surprise as she noticed that he had credited the story on the death of Mayor Leeson to Kent and Lane, not simply to himself as he would have been fully entitled to do. The Leeson arrest made a good splash, Lois thought, and Jimmy's photographs - one on the front page and another inside - were excellent. He had really come a long way from his early days at the Planet: it was sometimes difficult for her to remember Jimmy as he had been when he had first arrived as a newsroom trainee, a little under a year before she had gone to the Congo. Lois grimaced; it still hurt that she had, in effect, lost four years of her life, years when she could have been developing her career and spending time with friends - decent people like Jimmy and Perry.

She focused her attention on the coverage of the nail-bomb. The report was by another Planet stalwart, but Clark had called in an interview with Superman, which was trailed on the front page - at least now I know how he gets those, Lois thought with a shake of her head - and reading between the lines, she was struck by the raw emotion which was just about detectable in Clark's prose and 'Superman's' quotes. That explosion, and the injuries people had suffered, had really affected Clark. She supposed she shouldn't have been surprised, remembering his mood on the evening of the Chicago explosion, but she sat back in her chair, deep in thought, as she brooded over what this told her about Clark himself.

As she had written in her own article - ironically, also in today's Planet, she realised - the tough, invulnerable Man of Steel had a very vulnerable, emotional core. It hurt him when he couldn't save people; he found it hard to comprehend 'man's inhumanity to man,' the phrase Clark had used in his 'interview' on the subject of the nail bomb. Somehow, now that she knew Superman was Clark, Lois found herself empathising with him even more. Despite her residual hurt and anger, she couldn't help remembering Superman's bleak expression that evening when he had come to her apartment and ended up unburdening himself to her. Knowing that it had actually been Clark somehow made her mental picture of a lonely, isolated Super-hero all the more sad.

But Clark wasn't isolated! she insisted to herself impatiently. He has lots of friends!

< Does he?> her conscience prompted. < He has work colleagues - just like you do - but close friends? Sure, he told you he keeps in touch with school and college friends, but didn't he tell you that there are only two people in the world who know his secret?>

This was true, Lois reflected, reaching for her coffee-mug. Although Clark rarely showed anything other than an outward image of a good-humoured and confident individual, the previous evening had revealed that inwardly he was not quite as happy as he pretended. He *was* isolated - who could he talk to about the dual life he was forced to lead? Not Lana; she had refused to contemplate life with

super-powers, and had left him after, presumably, presenting him with an ultimatum. His parents were dead. There was no-one else.

Except me, Lois thought.

He had told her that he had intended to tell her the truth. Strangely enough, Lois now believed him; she wasn't sure why, but... well, when she came to think about it, Clark wasn't actually known for lying. Sure, he had deceived her about Superman, but other than that he didn't tend to lie. So why would he have lied about that, she wondered. To get himself off the hook? But it hadn't worked, and he must have known that she would be sceptical about his claim. No, she didn't think he was lying about that.

And it wasn't just that Clark didn't have anyone to confide in, Lois admitted; he clearly had some real fears related to the fact that he wasn't from Earth. As she had realised late the previous evening, his previous experience with a woman - and she suspected that Lana might have been Clark's first and only relationship - had been a disaster which had clearly left him quite traumatised and believing that his being from Krypton was something which Earth women would find repulsive.

< I need to find a way to tell him that isn't true....> Lois thought.
< But what do *I* want from him... if anything?>

As Clark entered the newsroom, a number of his colleagues rushed to congratulate him on breaking the Leeson death story and on his exclusive Superman interview. He accepted the congratulations in good spirit, while looking swiftly around the newsroom for Lois. She didn't appear to have arrived yet.

He booted up his computer and scanned his email: nothing exciting; a couple of messages from colleagues at rival papers offering their envious praise at his scoops and demanding good-humouredly to know how he had managed to get the Leeson story. < If only you knew... and I'm not sure you'd want the downside of it> he mused bleakly as he closed his mail program and reached for his Filofax. Time to make a few phone calls....

"Clark!"

He swung around abruptly as he recognised the voice calling to him. Lois!

She hurried over, still wearing her coat, and waving a piece of paper in her hand. "I thought I'd save us some time, and went straight to pick up the lab test results on Leeson. Like you said, it was cyanide."

Clark glanced at the paper; he hadn't needed the confirmation for himself, but for their story it was certainly necessary. What he found hard to accept, though, was that Lois seemed to be behaving as if nothing had happened between them! He turned his gaze to her again, and realised that he had jumped to conclusions. There were shadows under her eyes and she wore more make-up than usual. Her smile also seemed forced....

Not wanting to make things any harder for either of them, he reached out and took the sheet of paper from her. "Thanks, Lois. I was just about to call Henderson and find out what's going on with Luthor - you want to do some background on Asabi?"

She shrugged. "Thought I'd get Jimmy - or your friend Jack - to check him out for us. I can talk to Leeson's former staff and get some reaction stuff - and don't you need to make a couple of statements about what Luthor did to us?" she added more quietly.

"Already did that," Clark replied. He was about to say something else, but a runner interrupted him, bringing across an envelope.

"Special delivery, Clark Kent," the runner explained before hurrying off. Clark glanced at the envelope: plain brown manila, addressed in a handwriting he didn't recognise. It had been delivered by a courier company, and was marked 'Confidential: Addressee Only.'

Shrugging, he slit the envelope open and withdrew the couple of sheets of folded paper inside. The letter was typed, in a standard font and printed on a laser-printer; nothing unusual there. But as he unfolded the letter he caught sight of the signature and emitted a low whistle.

"What is it, Clark?" Lois demanded, her personal feelings shoved aside as her reporter instincts told her something important was happening.

"This is from Patricia Leeson," Clark replied, his own voice incredulous. He glanced around quickly before scanning the letter at super-speed, then handed it to Lois. She gasped at this display of his abilities; not just that he was capable of reading at such speed, but that he had no hesitation in doing it in front of her. Clark noticed and correctly interpreted her expression, and murmured, caustically in spite of himself, "You know, so what's the point in disguising what I can do in front of you? Unless you'd prefer me to pretend...." he trailed off, again wondering whether Lois was of the same mind as Lana when it came to Super-powers.

"I don't have a problem with you doing things like that," Lois whispered in reply. "I'm just surprised that you'd do it... dressed like that."

He shrugged. "No-one's looking."

Lois pulled up a chair next to his desk and sat down to read the letter. Within two lines her head had jerked up to stare at Clark. "She's confessing?"

He nodded. He had been equally shocked to read Leeson's letter. She had begun, "Mr Kent, I am writing this to you because, of all the journalists I have encountered in my time as Mayor, I consider you to be the most honest and fair-minded. I know that it is the result of your investigation which has led to my arrest, but in some ways that is now a relief...."

"*Your* investigation?" Lois snorted. "I was the one who first thought about subliminal advertising." She continued reading. Leeson, it seemed, had wanted to get the entire plot off her chest, though

why she had chosen to confess to a reporter rather than the police seemed a little bizarre. That was explained further on in the letter, however.

Leeson explained how she had been called to a meeting, while employed by John Brentford as an administrator. At that meeting had been Brentford and another man; they put a proposition to her which, they said, would make her a very powerful and very rich woman, so long as she was prepared to do exactly as she was told. She had agreed, principally because at the time her mother had been in a nursing home and she was finding it difficult to keep up with the fees.

"The nursing home bit's true," Clark commented. "I've just checked out the computer records. Leeson's mother died a year ago."

So, the letter continued, Patricia Leeson had been groomed as a candidate for mayor; she had been assured that she would win the election, although she hadn't been aware on what basis those assurances had been made. After she had won, however, her every movement and decision had been controlled, at first through Brentford, and after his death by his business partner. She had always been uncomfortable about the entire set-up, however, the letter claimed, and after her mother had died she had indicated her wish to stand down after the next election. That had not been an option, and suddenly she had been ordered to have Nigel St John working in her private office - he had been a spy, Leeson confirmed, to ensure her good behaviour.

This time she had been told how the polls were being manipulated, but she had been powerless to escape because it had been made clear to her that if she withdrew from the campaign, or betrayed the plan or the people behind it in any way, she would die. But, the letter finished, the plan was now sunk thanks to Clark Kent's investigation, and so she wanted to tell the truth. She hadn't dared tell the police, because the man behind the plot had sources everywhere. However, she had decided to trust Clark.

"I'm pretty sure I'm going to be killed," the letter continued. "I know how this man operates, and he doesn't leave witnesses. I haven't even dared name him in this letter. But I'm hoping that you receive this, Mr Kent. Some time ago, as 'insurance' for myself, I placed some documents in a safety deposit box. The details are enclosed - make what use you can of the papers."

Lois stared at Clark. "She's given us Luthor!"

"I hope so," he said soberly. "She was right about being killed, though."

"Yeah." Lois was silent for a few moments, then added, "You were right - she was just a pawn. If that stuff about her mother is true, then she was blackmailed into it, and forced to carry on with it against her will."

Clark shrugged. "I sympathise, but she had options. She could have gone to the police at any time - there's the Witness Protection Programme. She'd have been safe."

"Not if Luthor really does have spies everywhere, as she suggests," Lois pointed out, handing Clark the letter. Their eyes met briefly;

Clark was the first to look away.

They both spoke at once.

Clark muttered, "I was thinking, maybe you're right. I should leave the Planet, move to another city...."

Simultaneously, Lois said quickly, "Clark, whatever I implied last night... I'd never tell anyone about you. Your secret's safe, I promise."

He stared at her. "Why?"

She shook her head slightly. "I got to thinking about it, and I can understand why it's such a big deal... if everyone knew, you'd have no life, and I couldn't imagine that." Her voice was deliberately pitched low; she was aware that he would be able to hear her anyway, and she wanted to ensure that no-one else could. "Why are you talking about moving away?" she added, realising what he had said.

"Why?" he repeated, puzzled. "You suggested it, Lois."

"But... I didn't mean it," she protested. "Look, Clark, I was hurt and angry...."

"Yeah, but we all say things in anger which actually turn out to be true," he pointed out. "Anyway, I think it makes sense. It'll probably take me a few weeks to work everything out, so I won't hand in my notice just yet."

She stared at him, suddenly realising that she really didn't want him to leave. Before she could say anything, however, he had stood up abruptly and was excusing himself. "I need to check out this safety deposit box, Lois. Think you can talk to Henderson, get an update on Luthor and the Leeson murder?"

She shrugged. "I imagine I can cope with him," she drawled coolly, getting to her feet and, deliberately not looking back at him, strolling to her own desk.

Settling down to work, Lois found that her thoughts were again distracted by thoughts of her partner. Her feelings for Clark were in a complete muddle, she mused; she didn't seem to know what she wanted, other than that - as she now realised - she didn't want him to leave Metropolis. Did that mean she didn't want to stop working with him, or more importantly, that she didn't want to lose him as a friend?

And what had he been up to at the end of their conversation, she brooded angrily. Couldn't he see that she had been trying to make amends for her reaction the previous evening? Not that she *should* be apologising, she thought bleakly; he was the one with the big secret. It was only natural that she should have been upset. But she had *told* him, this morning, that she would keep his identity secret, that she understood why he needed the privacy. She had also made it clear enough that she didn't want him to leave - and by her behaviour, she had hoped that she'd made it clear that she wanted to carry on working with him.

Clark wasn't stupid - why hadn't he seen what she was trying to say?

He's not stupid... but he is very sensitive about his other identity, Lois reminded herself thoughtfully. She had already worked that one out. After the way Lana had behaved, Clark was probably going to need a lot of convincing that Lois didn't feel the same way about his being from Krypton, or about the powers he possessed. He was clearly still very raw about that - his remark about Lois perhaps preferring him to pretend that he didn't have Super-powers had been uttered with a bitter edge to his voice. She buried her head in her hands; she would have a lot of work to do if she wanted to convince Clark that she was happy to accept him for who he really was.

If she wanted to convince him... but did she?

And therein lay another question: in what capacity was she willing to accept him? Clark didn't just want to be her partner; and although he obviously enjoyed being her friend, it had been equally obvious that he wanted more than friendship from her. He himself had referred to the 'connection' between them. He wanted them to be... what would he call it? Lovers? An 'item'? But then... he had also told her that he *had been* prepared to take a risk for their relationship. Past tense. So did that mean that she was too late?

But what did she want, anyway? Oh, a mere twenty-four hours ago the answer to that question would have been relatively easy, she conceded. She had been nervous of making a commitment, but she would have been willing to give it a try - at least, to agree to dating exclusively. But now - there was the question of trust. And she didn't know how she felt about that.

Lois grimaced and went to fetch another cup of coffee, vowing afterwards to get on with the research for their story. At least in that direction she might be able to make some progress.

Clark felt as if he couldn't get out of the Planet building quickly enough. It had been far harder than he had expected to see Lois, and her attitude hadn't really helped. She had initially simply ignored what had happened between them: her behaviour had been strictly businesslike. It had annoyed Clark so much that he had deliberately read Leeson's letter at Super-speed to remind her forcibly how things had changed between them.

He had to confess that she hadn't shown revulsion at his demonstration of his Super-abilities. On the other hand, she hadn't taken the opportunity to move the discussion to personal matters - although, given the content of Leeson's letter, he probably couldn't blame her. She had reassured him that she wouldn't reveal his secret, which was a relief; she actually seemed to understand why it was important, which also represented progress.

But she still didn't want *him*... although... He stilled suddenly as he remembered her reaction when he had mentioned moving away from Metropolis. She had looked shocked, had seemed unsure as to how to respond for a moment, then had said that she hadn't meant her

suggestion of the previous evening.

If that was the case... what did it mean? That she didn't want to force him out of his job? Or that she, personally, wanted him to stick around - and in what capacity? Surely not as a friend - her attitude towards him had been pretty cool, especially just before he had left.

If only he could understand her hostility, he mused bleakly as he entered the bank in which Patricia Leeson's safety deposit box was held. It didn't seem to be particularly aimed at Superman, he suddenly realised. He had acknowledged earlier, after he'd read her newspaper profile, that she didn't seem hostile to his alter ego any more. From her attitude this morning, whatever was bugging her about her discovery didn't seem to be connected to her discovery that he was, in fact, an alien. So perhaps he was wrong to assume that Lois was reacting in the same way Lana had?

And he had explained why he hadn't told her about his identity any sooner. He wasn't entirely sure whether she accepted this explanation, but she herself had conceded that she understood why his identity had to be a secret. So what else was there? What could explain this degree of anger and hostility?

His thoughts had to be put on hold as he applied to open the deposit box; some minutes later, he held the contents in his hand. There were papers: some hand-written, some typed, and a couple of micro-cassette tapes. They would have to wait until he got back to the Planet, where he had a micro-cassette recorder in his desk drawer.

Clark knew that he should have been more excited by his treasure trove, which appeared to contain important evidence. One of the hand-written documents was a diary, which appeared to have been written by Leeson over the previous three years. The entries were not particularly regular, but they contained references to important incidents, such as occasions when Brentford had given her particular instructions, the day when she had heard her former boss had drowned; when she had asked to be allowed out of the role which had been thrust upon her, and the arrival of Nigel St John in her private office. There were occasional references to an 'L' who on rare occasions made contact with her, and according to more recent entries appeared to threaten her frequently.

Clark began to despair of ever finding positive proof of Luthor's involvement, beyond the possibility of drawing inferences; but then his eye fell on one of the last entries. It read:

'Kent of the Planet was here today - he knows something, I'm sure. He told me St John's dead, which is the best news I've had all year. But he was hinting about Luthor - I didn't dare say anything, but it was so tempting to confide in him, to let all this guilt out. Called Luthor after - he threatened AGAIN to kill me if I breathed a word.'

Luthor! She had named him! Here at last was proof that the head of LexCorp was behind the election fraud, Clark thought delightedly. There was also evidence of death threats made by Luthor against Leeson, which ought at least to provide circumstantial evidence of his involvement in her murder. Together with his attempt on his and Lois's lives the previous evening, the man should be going to prison

for a very long time.

He turned to the other papers; these too provided new evidence. One clearly implicated Brentford in establishing her as a candidate, and another - typed on plain paper, with no letterheads or other identifying data - instructed Leeson to co-operate fully with Nigel St John or beware the consequences. The letter was not signed, but Clark wondered whether fingerprint analysis would yield any proof of its authorship. He slid it inside a plastic wallet to protect it, and headed back to the Planet.

On the way, his cellphone rang; glancing at the display before answering, he saw that the number displayed was the Planet newsroom. Perry, probably, he thought, or Jimmy with some news about Asabi. But it was Lois. She sounded subdued.

"Clark, can you meet me over at your place?"

He hesitated; why did she want to go to his apartment? Did she want to talk privately for some reason? Cautiously, he replied. "Yes, if you want, but what's up?"

"I just thought of something - I need to see my files again, and they're still over there. Can you meet me there in fifteen minutes? It'll take me that long to get a cab."

< I could get you there in fifteen seconds> he reflected with irony, but decided not to offer. "Sure, I'll see you there."

Lois terminated the call and grabbed her purse before heading down to the lobby to hail a cab. It occurred to her briefly that if she had asked him, Clark - Superman - could have picked her up from the Planet roof and flown her over to his apartment. But it was probably best not to invite any such intimacies at the moment; not while their personal relationship was in such a mess.

She had not found it as easy as she had hoped to concentrate on work; images of Clark's face, and of Superman, irritatingly kept floating in front of her eyes every time she had tried to focus on something. The previous evening's conversation, as well as their earlier exchange, kept playing over and over in her mind. What had Clark meant when he'd said he *had* been prepared to take a risk? Was he no longer interested? Or... had she made him hate her by her reaction to his secret? The more she reflected on their exchanges, the more her confidence crumbled. She conceded that he had every right - every need - to protect the secret of his identity, and despite her accusations the previous evening, she acknowledged that he was quite right: they had only known each other two weeks. Why should she expect that after such a short time, he would have trusted her with knowledge which could literally be life-threatening to him if it fell into the wrong hands?

So she needed to talk to him, she had finally accepted. She needed to apologise for some of the things she had said; and if he forgave her, perhaps she could ask him whether they could start again. After all, she thought with a humourless laugh, what did it matter whether he was Clark Kent, Superman, Kal-El or Batman - he was still the only

man she had ever met who made her feel so incredibly special, and so good about herself. He seemed to *cherish* her, but without being patronising about it. He valued her opinion and her abilities; he made it clear how much he wanted to be with her; and he made her feel like an attractive, desirable - and *desired* - woman.

But would he be willing to talk to her, she wondered - or had she ruined everything?

One thing was for sure: she had no wish to talk to him in the hothouse atmosphere of the newsroom. It hadn't escaped Lois's notice that a number of the other staff in the City Room had been giving the two of them openly curious looks earlier. The newly frosty, wary atmosphere between the Planet's newest partnership had clearly not gone unnoticed. It was also obvious, Lois realised wryly, that Jimmy was keeping a discreet distance from her; she couldn't really blame him, she conceded. Jimmy knew her of old, when she had been Mad Dog Lane and he had been a very junior gofer in the newsroom. When she had been in a bad mood, everyone within shouting range had usually suffered in some way; Jimmy was simply showing the better part of valour, she acknowledged with a mirthless snort.

So what was the best means of engineering a proper discussion with Clark, she had puzzled. < I could just go up onto the Planet roof and yell "Help, Superman!" > she had thought with a bitter grimace; would Clark even come if she did? But she had instantly shaken her head to banish that thought. Of *course* he would; it was not in his nature to refuse to help anyone in need. She had reminded him the previous evening of how well they knew each other after such a brief acquaintance; well, she certainly knew him well enough to understand his ethics.

Ideally, they needed to go to one or the other's homes, she had reflected. That was easier said than done; what excuse could she plausibly give for suddenly inviting him over for dinner, after the way she had treated him? She had shaken her head, dismissing the problem as one to be resolved later. She *really* needed to get on with the Luthor investigation: the news of the arrest of LexCorp's chief executive would not remain secret for much longer, and the Planet had to be first with the story and the background information.

Shortly afterwards, while she had been holding for one of LexCorp's staff to answer a call, she had again been puzzling over the various strands of their investigation. It still galled her that they had not been able to link Luthor to the attempts on her life, other than the final one. She had then begun to wonder why Luthor had actually been so determined to terminate her life. What danger was she to him? He clearly had not expected her to return from the Congo; was he afraid that she had discovered something out there which could implicate him?

But he had tried to have her killed while she had been out there; had succeeded in arranging the murder of her colleague. So he obviously believed that she had information which could harm him. And on at least two occasions Luthor had sent minions to search her apartment. St John on the first occasion, and according to Clark Asabi had been there the previous afternoon.

So was there something in her files which she had overlooked, or of

which she had previously failed to identify the significance? It was worth checking out, she had decided. But her files were still at Clark's place, so they would have to go there. She had hesitation as she had wondered whether the location was just a little too intimate, given the current state of near-hostilities between them.

But on the other hand, wouldn't this provide the perfect opportunity to have that conversation she had wanted? If they were to be at his place for a completely innocent, work-related purpose, then at least some of the awkwardness should be dealt with. And perhaps they could actually get time, and space, to talk openly and honestly about their feelings.

She wanted them to be friends, at least. And so, perhaps by talking to each other privately, away from the Planet, they might be able to resolve things. Maybe... if she could convince Clark that she wasn't like Lana.

Clark stopped briefly at his desk at the Planet to collect his cassette player, then hurried up to the roof and took off, as Superman, to his apartment. Landing on his balcony a bare minute later, he spun into jeans and a T-shirt, leaving his glasses off, and removed Lois's files from his secret compartment, where he had placed them for safe keeping. A few moments later, a sharp knock sounded at the door.

Lois looked taken aback when she saw him; he realised that it was probably because of his change of attire, but he decided to ignore her reaction, instead simply inviting her in and offering her a drink. Sitting opposite her at his kitchen table a couple of minutes later, he forced himself to concentrate on the job rather than on his feelings for her, although it was difficult. He couldn't help but notice that she seemed to be as nervous as he was; her eyes avoided his gaze and her voice was hesitant.

He decided to try to break the ice and directed the conversation to their investigation.

"So, Lois, you want to tell me about your files, or hear what I found out?"

She looked at him with interest, as if grateful that he had stuck to business matters. "Did you get anything useful?"

Wordlessly, he passed the documents over to her. She scanned the printed sheets, and then the diary. "Henderson will love this," she murmured eventually. "We've nailed him!"

"For election fraud and abuse of the political process, sure," Clark agreed. "There's possibly even enough to suggest motive for Leeson's murder. It doesn't get us anywhere on the attempts on your life, beyond what we have so far."

"Or the gun-running," she agreed. She then gestured to the cassettes. "Where did they come from?"

"They were in the box as well," he explained. "I haven't had a chance to listen to them yet."

Lois gestured at his micro-cassette player. "Let's get on with it, then."

Clark sighed as he complied with her request, placing the tape labelled '#1' into the machine. This was proving even more difficult than he had feared: it was pure torture sitting across the table from Lois with the memory of the past twelve hours or so between them. Every moment in Lois's company was simply causing him further pain.

The sooner he handed in his notice the better, he thought.

They listened to the tapes in silence, occasionally independently jotting down notes. The tapes were dynamite, Lois realised; some of them were recordings of telephone conversations with Leeson and Luthor, with explicit reference in some cases to orders Luthor was instructing Leeson to pass through the city council. Towards the end of the tapes there were also references to 'Luthor's spy,' on one occasion actually named as St John. Then there was one final conversation, which Clark told Lois he recognised as the phone call Leeson had placed to Luthor after his visit to her two days earlier. Luthor's coldly-uttered remark that he would allow Leeson to take the fall if the fraud became public knowledge was clearly audible.

Lois knew she should have been ecstatic. This was almost the biggest business/political scandal since Watergate. The third richest man in the world had been caught red-handed in a rather stupid, and parochial, plot to buy the mayor of a city - okay, a pretty big city, but it wasn't as if he had tried to control the Governor, or had a couple of State Senators in his pocket... although, she mused, those were possibilities; it might be worth poking around to see whether Luthor did have any other inappropriate links with elected officials.

Eventually, Clark heaved a heavy sigh. "Okay, so it's looking like we've nailed Luthor, at least for election fraud even if we haven't managed to link him to murder or the attempts on your life." He forced himself to smile. "Nice work, Lois. Do you want to call Henderson, or will I?"

She shrugged. "Either. Or we could go down and see him together. We have to write all this up as well - Perry should be pretty darned pleased with us." She put on a broad grin, hoping that it didn't look as fake as she felt. "My bet is this will win us at least a Kerth, if not a Pulitzer: the downfall of the third richest man in the world."

Clark nodded bleakly, avoiding her gaze. "Yeah - well, you deserve it, Lois. I'm sure you'll make a great acceptance speech on our behalf."

She stared at him. "What on earth are you talking about? You're not still... Clark, you're not seriously considering leaving Metropolis?"

He got to his feet abruptly and started to pace the room. "What

choice do I have, Lois? I told you yesterday how I felt about you. I don't think I can go on working with you now... not after what's happened."

She tried to catch his gaze again, but he steadfastly looked away. "Clark, you can't still be angry that I threatened to tell people about... about you?"

What was she talking about? Clark frowned; he had, if he was honest with himself, known all along that she wouldn't give him away. He sighed deeply. "Lois, I'm not angry with you. I know that you had a right to be... upset... that I hadn't told you everything about me, but you must see that I had my reasons. I can't help who I am, Lois. Superman is part of who I am. I can't pretend not to have powers, not any more."

She got to her feet and walked towards him, placing her hand on his arm and bracing herself for his rejection as she did so. "Clark, I'm not Lana. I would never try to make you forget who you are. Your powers... Superman... aren't a problem as far as I'm concerned."

So... why... With a sudden flash of inspiration, Clark realised. He could have kicked himself for not seeing the explanation sooner; there had been enough clues, and he had in fact come close enough to it a couple of times. He had in fact hit on it the previous evening while he had been out flying, but he had failed to see the significance of his thoughts.

He turned and met her gaze, speaking softly. "Every man you've trusted has let you down in some way, haven't they?" he asked. She stared back at him, silently questioning.

"Your father was never there for you. Your college boyfriend went off with someone else. Claud used you and stole your story." Lois winced as he listed off the ways in which the men closest to her had hurt her. He continued, slowly, "And I seemed to be a pretty straightforward guy... you were beginning to trust me, and then you found out that I'd been deceiving you too." He paused again. "So you thought I was going to let you down, like everyone else did. So you decided to get in and reject me first."

Lois had remained silent during Clark's speech. He was right; even though she would have found it difficult to explain herself, that was the main reason why she had been so hurt and angry the previous evening. Clark had understood that, even while he had been hurting at her rejection of him.

She nodded mutely, tears glistening in the corners of her eyes. "Yeah, that's exactly it." She paused, taking a shuddering sigh. "It was never about Superman, Clark. If you'd told me yourself, I really wouldn't have minded. You have to know that I was... well, starting to like him. You must have seen that the last time he - you - came to my place."

He nodded. "I was... hoping...."

"Well, I was. And you must have read my article?"

He nodded again. "I wanted to tell you - I think it's a really great

piece of work. You - well, you understand me like no-one else ever has. Even better than I understand myself."

Lois reached for his hand; he squeezed her fingers in return. "Clark - over the last week, I've thought you understand *me* better than I do myself - so that makes two of us."

His eyes met hers; they smiled tentatively at each other. He broke the silence. "So, I'll promise not to compare you with Lana, if you promise not to compare me with Claud or your father. How's that?"

"I promise!" Lois agreed. Her expression changed, became anxious. "Clark... I don't want to lose you...."

He gave her a wry smile. "I don't want to lose you either. I already told you how I feel about you - and I can't even explain it either, but I felt it the instant I saw you. But I'm prepared to be patient... if all you can offer is friendship, then that'll be enough, for now."

What *did* she want? This was decision time, Lois felt. Yes, Clark had said he would wait for her; but suddenly she knew that he wasn't the only one who needed to prove his trust. *She* had to show him that she trusted him, as well.

She pulled her hand from his; his expression altered again, became shuttered, as he stepped away from her. But she closed the gap between them and reached her arms up and around his neck. "I don't want to be patient, Clark," she murmured.

His face lit up as he took in the implications of her statement, and then daylight was blotted out as his mouth descended to claim hers in a passionate kiss, and his arms closed tightly around her. Neither of them was aware of anything but each other for several minutes, until Clark reluctantly broke the kiss and relaxed his grip on Lois, giving her a rueful smile.

"Are you sure about this, Lois? Because... because I don't think I could handle it if you changed your mind," he finished on a whisper.

"Clark, I'm not going to change my mind," she insisted. "I think I started to fall in love with you that evening you helped me to move into my apartment - maybe even before that, when you realised I needed reassurance that I could still be a great journalist."

< Started to fall in love...> Clark stared at her. "You *love* me?"

She nodded. "I didn't realise it until you started talking about leaving. I knew I didn't want you to go, but I didn't know why. I figured it out when I realised that I really didn't care that - "

"That I'm Superman?" he interrupted her.

"No, not that," she dismissed his interjection. "Clark, you could be Batman for all I care - that doesn't matter. Although, to be honest, I'm just as glad you're not, you know, because I never much cared for

the way he operates. He's a bit too cynical, not very friendly, you know? No, what I meant was that it didn't *matter* that I found out about you before you told me. You had very good reasons for not telling me, and anyway, you were going to tell me everything." At his surprised look, she continued, "You said you'd intended to, and I believe you."

He stared at her. She *did* trust him! He felt as if an enormous weight had been lifted from his shoulders; he wanted to shoot upwards, into the air, and fly great loop-the-loops with joy. She *loved* him!

Some time later, and reluctantly, Clark eased himself away from Lois's welcoming arms and questing lips. "Lois... I'd love to spend all day doing this, but we have a criminal to send to prison."

Lois sat up, dragging herself away from where she had been reclining against Clark's broad chest on his sofa. "Yeah, I suppose so. Catch the bad guys, write the story, blah, blah, blah - but let's do it quickly, please, so we can get on with the important things?"

"And they would be...?" Clark enquired, teasing.

She tapped his jaw in admonishment. "I was assuming that you would want to spend more time... getting to know each other?"

He laughed, his heart lighter than it had been since their capture by Luthor. He loved Lois, she loved him, and she didn't *care* that he was from Krypton - she just wanted to be with him.

Perhaps this is the kind of love my Mom and Dad had, he reflected as he gathered together the evidence for Henderson. Maybe even Jor-El and Lara - both for each other and for the little baby they sent millions of miles away rather than allow him to be killed by an exploding planet. His gaze met Lois's, and the warmth in her smile made his knees feel weak. It took a supreme exertion of willpower to escort Lois out of his apartment in search of a cab.

Henderson was, in his own laconic way, delighted with the new evidence, though he was quick to confiscate it from the reporters. < Just as well we stopped by the Planet first to make copies of some of this stuff> Lois mused as they signed for the documents and cassettes.

Luthor was still in custody, although he now had a team of lawyers threatening injunctions and making bail applications. The MPD and the DA's office were strongly opposing bail, using the attempt on Lane and Kent's lives as arguments. Henderson was reasonably confident that the letters and tapes would also provide sufficient circumstantial evidence that Luthor had in some way been involved in Mayor Leeson's murder; even if he hadn't put the cyanide in the whiskey himself, he had somehow authorised the act. The fact that cyanide had been the common ingredient in both St John's and Leeson's deaths was also suspicious, the common denominator in both cases being Lex Luthor.

Henderson was by now more inclined to believe that Luthor, rather than St John acting independently, might possibly have been behind the other attempts on Lois's life. It didn't make sense that Luthor would have decided, out of the blue, to murder Lois and Clark; it made far more sense if he had been behind previous attempts, and since St John had been an employee of Luthor's, the supposition now was that he had been acting under orders from his boss. The head of LexCorp himself was, however, answering no questions, and there was still no hard proof tying him to the gun-running.

The two reporters returned to the Planet very satisfied with themselves. They were also still trying to get used to acknowledging openly their feelings for each other; in the cab on the way back to the newspaper they kept stealing sidelong glances in each other's direction, and held hands the whole way. Lois felt like a starry-eyed teenager; but that was how Clark made her feel, she admitted. And it felt great.

Perry was also delighted with their Luthor exclusive, and he promptly cleared the entire front page for the story, which meant that Lois and Clark were kept busy writing for most of what remained of the day. Jimmy and Jack were seconded to help: Henderson had quietly tipped Clark off that the police were planning to go through Lex Luthor's business dealings with a fine tooth-comb, so Clark asked the two young assistants to compile a list of all companies which Luthor was in any way involved with.

"And that includes companies where he's a director, or dummy corporations," Clark added as Jimmy was about to hurry off to get started.

Lois's head jerked up. "That's it, Clark!"

"Huh?" Clark stared back at his partner. "What is, Lois?"

"Dummy corporations!" she replied, bafflingly from Clark's point of view. "Clark, I need to go through my files again..." She trailed off, beginning to search through the piles of paper and folders on her desk.

"We left them at my place," Clark reminded her. "What's up?"

"Something just occurred to me - I'm going to have to go and get them, okay?" she insisted, getting to her feet and looking around for her purse.

But Clark came to stand in front of her, placing his hands lightly on her shoulder. "No need, Lois - trust me, if you need them, I can be back here with them before you even know I'm gone."

Lois blinked. Of **course** he could. He was Superman... and come to think of it, she reflected, having a super-powered partner could have its advantages...

She leaned forward and upwards, pressing her lips lightly against his. "I like a partner who pulls his weight," she murmured provocatively.

Clark grinned, returned the kiss, and swiftly stepped away from Lois. As he hurried towards the stairwell, fingers pulling at his tie as he did so, his super-hearing picked up an exchange between two of his colleagues.

"Hey - what's up with Lane and Kent now? This morning it was colder than the Arctic around those two!"

"I got no idea," he heard Ralph reply. "But if Kent's managed to tame Mad Dog Lane, I wanna know his secret."

Clark grinned as he headed up the stairs, spinning into Superman once he was out on the roof; that was one conversation he wouldn't repeat to Lois!

Turning back to her computer screen once Clark had left, Lois recalled Clark's movements as he had hurried out. She had noticed him groping at the knot of his tie on several occasions before, and had simply ascribed it to a nervous habit. But with her newfound knowledge, it was clearly a preliminary to dashing off to be Superman.

How on earth had he managed it for all that time? He had been Superman for more than eighteen months, and in that time had continued to hold down a very demanding job as a newspaper reporter - a highly successful reporter, at that. Sure, he was fast; he could get from one place to another in split seconds. But he was also hampered by the limits of technology: for instance, he could only type as fast as the current generation of computer keyboards could cope with. He would also be constrained by the need to hide his abilities from those around him....

Lois frowned. If Clark had possessed all these abilities from whatever age he developed them - and she had yet to find out the full story there - then he had been hiding his true self almost all his life. He had told her that Lana Lang had been the only person who had known the truth about him; and since she had refused to accept that part of him, then he had probably had to hide himself from her as well.

< Well, he can be his real self with me > she promised herself, and Clark, silently.

"You're looking very thoughtful, Lois - I hope this is our story you're busy solving," the object of her musing observed in an amused tone from just behind her. She swung around; Clark stood there holding her files.

"That was quick!" she murmured quietly, pitching her voice so that none of their colleagues - who now seemed to be exercising a certain amount of curiosity about Lane and Kent's doings - could hear.

Clark grinned. "I would have been quicker if I hadn't had to worry about your stuff vaporising on the way back!"

Lois stared at him in amused disbelief, then grabbed at his thigh. "Come on, partner - sit down and let's get on with this!"

Clark pulled across a chair and sat down, trying to hide his

amusement at the shocked gasps he heard from a number of their colleagues who had seen Lois's apparent grope. "Okay, partner - just what are we looking for?"

"A dummy corporation," she replied swiftly. "Look, one of the things I was never able to get to the bottom of before was the import-export company which handled the apparently legit side of the business." She shuffled through some papers. "See - InterContinental TransitCo. It's - or it was - a real company, and it issued the documentation for the goods which were supposedly being imported, when all the time what was really being smuggled in was guns. I tried to investigate InterContinental, but the people who worked there just seemed to be innocent employees doing what they were told. But InterContinental was owned by..." again she shuffled, searching for something.

"Got it!" she exclaimed a moment later; Clark was grateful his super-hearing hadn't been active at the time since she would probably have deafened him. "Here!" She stabbed at a page.

"LinCar PLC?" Clark queried. "Who's behind that?"

Lois turned an excited face to her partner. "I was never able to find out - all of the names on the board seemed to be retired or never answered their phones or email. But I reckon it's a dummy company!"

"Well, that would make sense," Clark agreed. "You think this might be our link to Luthor?"

"Well, who else has such a large number of companies and has fingers in just about every commercial pie in Metropolis? We've asked Jimmy to trace all of Luthor's business interests - let's get him to check this one out too."

Clark got to his feet. "I'll tell him."

"Hey guys!" Jimmy Olsen came hurrying across the bullpen to Lois's desk where the two reporters were proof-reading their main Luthor arrest story before emailing it to Perry.

Clark swung around to face his young colleague. "Got anything for us, Jim?"

"You betcha, CK!" Clark could see that Jimmy was excited, and he smiled as he pulled up another chair to the side of Lois's desk.

"Well?" Lois prompted impatiently. "What've you got?"

Jimmy grinned; he was enjoying this. "Well, we're doing pretty good putting together that list of all Luthor's business interests - y'know, that guy is pretty smart at covering his tracks, I can tell ya! Anyway, Jack's on that right now. I just had to come and show you this LinCar stuff."

"Jimmy, show us, already!" Lois demanded impatiently.

Clark tutted, grinning at Jimmy. "Patience, Lois..." She batted at

his hand and glared at Jimmy.

"Well, okay, this is the story," he began to explain. "LinCar *is* a dummy corporation -"

"*Is*" Lois demanded. "It still exists?"

"Yeah," Jimmy retorted. "Hey, if you'd let me explain, Lois..." She waved impatiently at him. "Well, most of the people on the board of LinCar are either dead or retired or live overseas -"

"I already knew that!" Lois interjected.

Jimmy ignored her. "But there's one person whose name stood out..." He pointed to the list of directors. "See? A. Carlin."

"LinCar," Clark said quietly, seeing that Jimmy was getting at.

"Yeah. So I guessed this A. Carlin must be important here. So I tried to track him down - only to find that he is a she."

"So?" Lois didn't see where this was leading.

"Ariana Carlin," Jimmy explained. "We dug around a bit - turns out Ariana Carlin is none other than the former Mrs Lex Luthor."

"What!!" It had been worth risking Lois's wrath by dragging the tale out, Jimmy thought, as he saw the expression of sheer disbelief on Lois's face.

"Luthor was *married?" she demanded.

Clark shrugged. "He's in his forties, Lois - it's not inconceivable."

"So who is this Ariana Carlin - and when did she and Luthor split up?" Lois asked.

"Well, the records say she's British, and that she and Lex were married on a cruise ship. The marriage is barely mentioned anywhere, though, so it's not surprising you never heard. Seems they split up about five years later - seven years ago now - but it looks like Luthor still kept a few things in her name when he didn't want them to be traced back to him."

"Sounds a bit risky," Clark observed. "Surely it wouldn't be too difficult for people to find out that Carlin was his wife - after all, you did it."

"Thanks for your massive faith in my abilities, CK!" Jimmy protested. "It took some pretty amazing hacking skills to put all this together, you know."

"Yeah, you did a great job, Jimmy," Clark soothed. "So, Lois, is this enough to allow us to suggest that Luthor might be connected to the arms-smuggling?"

Lois considered. "Perry might buy it, but the lawyers won't."

"Hey!" Jimmy interrupted. "You're underestimating me again. I did a little more digging, and looked at the share ownership structure of LinCar. It was complicated - the trails lead all over the place. But...." He paused for dramatic effect. "But I finally found a trail that leads all the way to LexCorp!" He brandished a piece of paper triumphantly.

"Nice one, Jimmy!" Lois exclaimed, seizing the incriminating document.

After Jimmy had returned to help Jack finish their research, Clark leaned his elbows on the desk and faced Lois. "So we have him on the arms smuggling at last... but nothing more on the attempts on your life."

Lois grimaced. "Isn't this enough, together with what Luthor said on that tape you got?"

Clark stared at her. "No way!" he said roughly. "That man tried to have you killed a number of times - he did manage to have your colleague killed. I am *not* allowing him to get away with that!"

He really meant it, Lois realised. She knew Clark loved her - he had told her that, several times now. But hearing his anger at what had almost happened to her somehow reinforced in her mind the strength of his feelings for her. She felt warmed and cared for as she had never been before in her life.

But as she was about to tell him what his words meant to her, he stood up abruptly. "Sorry, Lois, I need to go..." he paused, then glanced around cautiously. "I'm needed - someone's in trouble."

She nodded. "Okay - I understand. Go."

"Thanks. I'll be back soon to help you with this."

As Lois busied herself with integrating the new proof of Luthor's involvement in the arms smuggling business and with finishing off the stories for the front page, the TV screens suddenly flickered into life. Her head jerked up as she heard Superman mentioned; there had been a train crash on the outskirts of the city and Superman was busy helping to free the trapped and injured. Perry quickly despatched a reporter and photographer to the scene, at the same time glancing towards Lois's desk.

"Uh, Lois, where's Kent got to?"

Lois thought quickly. "He went out to check something we needed for the Luthor story... uh, he'll be back in - oh, I guess a half hour or so."

Perry shrugged. "Well, he better be. The news of Luthor's arrest is breaking despite Henderson's attempt to keep it quiet, and I want the Planet's exclusive to break all sales records tonight and tomorrow."

Lois grinned at her boss. "Shouldn't be a problem, Perry." She leaned back in her chair as she outlined the proof which linked Luthor to arms smuggling. The editor emitted a low whistle.

"We running this tonight or tomorrow?"

Lois chewed the end of her pencil briefly before replying. "I think we can wait until tomorrow, Chief. There's plenty for the evening edition, and anyway I guess we owe it to Henderson to run this new evidence by him before we print it."

Perry raised an eyebrow at his star reporter. "You mean you want him to run some of it through the police computers to see what else you can come up with before we print?" Lois grinned; her editor knew her pretty well. Perry wandered off back to his office, muttering something about getting on to the boys upstairs to book more advertising.

An hour later, Lois wearily emailed the last of the first batch of stories to Perry and sat back; to her surprise warm lips caressed the side of her neck and firm hands began to knead her back and shoulders.

"I'm sorry I was so long," Clark murmured. "Don't know if you saw, but there was a diesel spillage as well and I had to help clean that up."

"That's okay," Lois assured him quietly. "You gave me credit on last night's exclusives when I had nothing to do with them."

Clark pulled another chair over to her desk again and swivelled her monitor around so that he could read quickly through the articles she had written. "These are really great, Lois - fantastic work. But I'm going to tell Perry the by-line should be Lane and Kent on this one."

She shook her head. "No - this is still related to the Leeson investigation, and that was your story to begin with. But I'm telling you now, tomorrow's articles will be on the arms-smuggling, and the by-line then will be Lane and Kent."

"No problem," Clark assured her. "Hey, you know, I really like how that sounds - I think it has a better ring to it than Kent and Lane. I think we should tell Perry that's the way we want it in future."

"In future?" Lois threw him a questioning stare. "We were only partnered temporarily - until I got back on my feet as a reporter - "

"Well, there's no question that you're back on top," Clark assured her.

"So will Perry still want to partner us?" she asked him.

He shrugged. "Don't see why not - we work together pretty well. We complement each other, and there is **no-one** else I would want to work with now. Besides which, I don't have to lie to you when I need to go and be...." his voice dropped to a low whisper, "you-know-who."

"True," Lois agreed. "And you probably wouldn't find another partner who'd be willing to put up with all your disappearances." She allowed her gaze to linger on his face for a few moments longer than was strictly necessary. Oh, how she longed to abandon all this stuff until tomorrow, and drag him off somewhere they could talk, and get to know each other, and kiss....

He smiled at her, a slow smile full of secret promise. "Ah, but I think you'll find I'll make it up to you...." Just as soon as we can get out of here, he thought with a desperate longing.

She grinned, noticing with pleasure that he seemed to be as eager as she was. "Good. Now, can you use some of your, ah, *speed*, so we can get finished and get out of here?"

But they weren't to get away quite so soon; Lois's phone rang a few minutes later. The caller's identity shocked her; cupping the receiver with her hand, she mouthed at Clark, "It's Joe Santiago!"

Clark did a double-take, and came to sit beside Lois so that he could listen in on the conversation with his super-hearing. Santiago, the ex-con and now diner owner, wanted to meet.

They spoke to Joe Santiago in the Planet conference room a few minutes later. The diner owner had seen the news of Luthor's arrest, and it seemed that his conscience had pricked him.

"When you came round asking questions before, there was no way I was going to tell you anything," he explained nervously. "I was lucky enough to have got away from that business alive as it was. But if I'd given you any information I could have wound up dead - like Mitch, like Raoul Garcia, Don Parker...."

Clark interrupted. "You think Luthor had them killed as well?"

Santiago raised an eyebrow. "What do you think? Mitch was used to set you up," nodding at Lois, "and Parker was supposed to kill you last week, though I don't know what happened. But Raoul Garcia... he thought he'd got away with it, until Luthor and his pal caught up with him."

Lois and Clark exchanged glances; the whole plot was finally coming together. "What did Garcia do, Joe?" Lois demanded.

Santiago studied her silently for a few moments, finally answering. "He was supposed to have you killed out in the Congo - he hired some mercenaries who went over there and found you and your photographer. You see, Luthor knew you were onto the deal all along, but he wanted your death to look like an accident. Careless woman reporter, doesn't know the territory, runs into some guerilla fighting... you know the kind of thing? And everyone thought you were dead, including Luthor. Until - you came back, two weeks ago."

"So Luthor definitely ordered the killings?" Clark demanded tensely.

"Yeah. Look, I was in on the thing at the time, I knew the big boys knew a reporter was onto us. But I didn't know who it was until the Planet broke the story of Lois Lane's disappearance while on a gun-running investigation. And Luthor was the head man behind that business the whole time. Brentford was only a junior partner - he was taking orders from Luthor. And I've always been pretty sure Luthor killed Brentford, somehow. Luthor didn't know I knew he was Mr Big - that's the only reason I got out of it alive, I guess. Brentford told me - I was his insurance. But then he wound up dead, and there was no way I was risking my life to tell anyone."

Santiago began to shuffle awkwardly as he finished his speech. "Look, I've told you what you wanted to know. Can I go now?"

"Hang on a minute!" Lois interrupted him. "You came to us, remember? Sure, we're grateful for the information, but it's not worth a damn if we can't substantiate it. Are you willing to come down to the precinct and repeat all this to Inspector Henderson?"

Santiago blanched, but Clark instantly reached out and caught his arm. "Look., you'll be protected. Luthor's in custody, and he hasn't a snowball's chance in hell of getting out this side of his seventieth birthday with the charges he's got hanging over him. And Henderson'll put you in the Witness Protection Programme - we'll see to that."

Santiago looked unconvinced. Lois raised an eyebrow at him. "Look, Joe, why did you come to us with this if you weren't prepared to be quoted?"

He sighed, then met Lois's gaze. "Okay. I'll do it. I want to see Luthor put away. Mitch was a friend of mine - but this Henderson guy better give me proper protection."

Lois and Clark looked at each other, and simultaneously cried, "Yes!"

"You know, Clark, I've always thought I was a city girl, but it's really beautiful out here," Lois said softly.

He smiled down at her, tightening his arm around her shoulder. "I knew you'd love Smallville. Even though I don't come back here that much now, it still holds some special memories for me."

She threw him a glance from under lowered lashes. "Well, I won't forget this evening in a hurry! I'd love to know how you do that 'spin-change' manoeuvre - I nearly fell over in shock when you did it back at my apartment!"

Laughing aloud, Clark bent his head and then whispered, "You never know - one of these days I might do it in slow motion, just for you...."

Once Joe Santiago had agreed to give evidence of Luthor's involvement in a number of murders and the attempted murder of Lois in the Congo, the two reporters had accompanied him to see Henderson. The detective had even thrown off his trademark cynicism when confronted with Santiago's story: the ex-con had been able to offer substantial proof

to back up his allegations, including names, dates and places. Henderson had taken a detailed statement, and had taken Santiago off to ensure that he was looked after.

So, now that Luthor was safely behind bars and facing trial for more than they had ever hoped to pin on him, Lois was much more interested in getting to know her partner and now boyfriend. So Clark had suggested taking her flying, and had brought her to Smallville to show her where he had grown up. Strolling around the town and then the surrounding countryside with her in the twilight of late evening, he had told her about his memories of Jonathan and Martha Kent, and his later life with foster parents, while at the same time coping with his developing powers.

"So - why Superman?" Lois asked at last.

Clark shrugged. "The name's nothing to do with me, so don't call me egotistical or anything. The Suit isn't my doing either. It was really weird - about eighteen months ago this little guy came to my apartment..." He related the story of his strange visitor and, remembering their conversation over dinner, described the man. Lois agreed that the description did appear to match her rescuer in the Congo, though neither of them were able to work out who he might have been.

"So, you wore the Suit, and carried on helping people?"

"That's about it," Clark agreed. "And I liked it - I could help without having to worry about anyone seeing what I was doing. And you know, at first I didn't believe the Suit would be much of a disguise, but when no-one recognised me it felt terrific. Except that all the media wanted to get the exclusive - that's why I wrote that piece for the Planet. You're right about the 'truth and justice' quote - it was all I could think of at the time. I can write about anyone else and be as objective as I want, but when it came to writing about myself I was just too self-conscious."

Lois gave him a teasing laugh. "That's okay, Flyboy - just leave the Superman exclusives to me in future!"

She sobered then and, winding her arm more tightly around his, said softly, "It must have been really tough for you after your parents died - I mean, not just being without them, but discovering your powers at the same time."

He glanced at her, then nodded. "I was pretty scared, Lois. I always knew I was adopted, and I had the globe - I'll show you that later, back at my apartment. But it hadn't 'spoken' to me then, and I didn't have the first clue about where I came from. It finally did 'speak' about six years ago - it contained recordings of some messages from Jor-El and Lara, telling me who I was and why they'd send me to Earth. But I didn't know anything about that while I was growing up. My parents always thought I was some sort of secret experiment, though whether they thought it was our government or the Russians I'm not sure."

"So what powers did you get first?"

He smiled down at her before answering. "The enhanced hearing, and my sight. I'd just hear things I knew I shouldn't have, and things

started blurring in front of me - that's why I got glasses initially. I thought I was getting short-sighted. Then one day I just... saw through a wall! Once I realised what was happening, I carried on wearing the glasses as a reminder to myself not to do it."

Lois fell silent as they walked, reflecting on the lonely and confused teenage boy Clark must have been. It was no wonder he had been wary about revealing what he could do - especially given the way Lana had behaved.... She raised her gaze to him again.

"Clark, about Lana...?"

He threw her a quick, reassuring smile. "Lois, that was over long ago, and I'm not carrying any baggage, I promise you. And I won't assume you'll react the same way as she did."

"No, that's not what I meant," Lois assured him quickly. "I just wondered... how was it you confided in her?"

Clark sighed, then led the way over to a low wall at the edge of a wood. "If this is a problem...?" Lois ventured, glancing at him anxiously, but he gestured that it was okay.

"I'd known Lana since I was about seven - her parents moved into the area and we went to the same school. I found her being picked on by some older kids one day and told them to leave her alone - she kind of adopted me as a big brother after that. And then when my folks were killed, she really seemed to understand how I felt. I spent a lot of time round at her place in the first year or so, just talking. So... well, we got pretty close."

"That's understandable," Lois agreed.

"Yeah. And she became my best friend. There wasn't anything romantic between us, even around the time other kids at school started dating - we were just friends. We told each other everything...."

"So when you discovered you could do things other people couldn't...?"

Clark shrugged. "Actually, I didn't tell her at first - I kept it all to myself because I really couldn't figure what was going on. I knew my parents had always worried that I was some sort of laboratory experiment, and I just thought maybe this was proof. So I was... well, kind of scared. I didn't even want to admit to myself that these things were happening - it was as if I pretended they weren't, then maybe they'd go away."

Lois remained silent, simply listening and again trying to assemble a picture in her mind of the suffering and confusion Clark must have undergone. It amazed her that he could have gone through all of this and still ended up as... yes, as *normal* as he seemed. There was no resentment at what had happened to him, the circumstances under which he had been sent from Krypton to Earth and then left alone to cope with being so different from anyone else. And he had grown up into the most courageous, honest, decent and caring man on the planet.

But Clark was speaking again. "One day I couldn't hide it any longer: I saw something I shouldn't have when I was with Lana, and it was

such a shock that I reacted aloud - I couldn't hide it from her then." He explained what had happened, adding that subsequently, once Lana had discovered that he wore glasses to remind himself not to look through walls, she had suggested that he could get special lenses containing tiny chips of lead which meant that he would not be able to see through anything while wearing them. He hadn't been able to do anything about that idea for some years, but eventually he'd found an ageing optician in a tiny village in South America who was willing to help.

"Lana was always nervous about my powers," Clark explained. "It got even worse when I was eighteen and I discovered I could fly. You know, out of all I could do, that excited me the most. The feeling I have when I'm up there, in the air, just floating in the clouds or cutting through the sky... it's like nothing else I've ever experienced. I only ever managed to persuade Lana to let me take her flying once, though. She hated it, and hated the fact that I was able to do it."

"I can't understand that." Lois shook her head in disbelief. "Flying with you...well, it's incredible. I know I didn't seem to appreciate it the first time, but I was kind of angry with you - I just didn't want to know. But when we flew here this evening, Clark, it was just beautiful. What on earth was her problem, Clark?"

He clasped Lois's hand between both of his before answering. "I wish now I'd tried harder to understand her myself, Lois. When we finally broke up, I guess it was easier for me to blame her, telling myself that if she'd really loved me she'd have understood how important all this was to me - I know, you told me that the first time you came to my apartment. But I guess if I'd really loved her, I would have tried to understand her feelings too." He paused, staring across at the trees, their branches rustling in the light evening breeze. "It was only after I knew I was falling in love with you that I began to put things with Lana into perspective. You know, she never told anyone about me - even after we split up? And the split wasn't exactly friendly - she thought I'd betrayed her by going out in public as Superman after she'd said she didn't want me to. And yet we'd been friends for so long - once I got over my hurt pride I realised the loss of that friendship was what really bothered me. So...." He paused, and glanced cautiously at Lois, wondering how she would take his next revelation. She seemed to be watching him with sympathetic interest, so he continued.

"A few days ago, I flew down to see her. She lives near Kansas City now - she's a high school teacher, and she's married to another teacher. He's a nice guy, and just what she wanted: a normal, All-American guy. I'd called and asked if we could talk, and she agreed. We went for a walk and spent a long time taking everything over. She actually agreed that she hadn't tried to understand how I felt about what I could do, but she told me that she thought I'd never listened when she tried to explain why she felt the way she did. She was scared - afraid that some day I'd be exposed, that someone would come and take me away, lock me up somewhere as an exhibit, or treat me as a laboratory specimen. The more I used my powers, the more scared she was that I'd get caught." He paused, then added, "And she was right: I never knew that was how she felt."

Lois had been thoroughly taken aback when Clark revealed his meeting

with Lana, but as he'd continued she had begun to understand the other woman's reaction. "Clark - so she didn't hate what you could do, she was just frightened by it!"

"Yeah," he replied slowly. "So everything I've believed for so long, about how people might react when they realise how different I am - the way I felt about your reaction yesterday - was all based on a false premise. And yes, I know," he added quickly before Lois could interrupt, "when we talked last night I already knew Lana's feelings about my powers had nothing to do with the fact that I'm an alien from another planet. But that idea had been in my mind for so long that it was easy to assume.... Anyway, apart from clearing the air between us, I'm really glad I talked with Lana. I think we'll be friends again, which I'm happy about. We just should never have been anything else."

"Yeah, I know how that feels," Lois murmured sympathetically. "I just wish my exes hadn't been such federal disasters. You know, there isn't one of them I'd want to be friends with now?"

Clark laughed softly, murmuring, "I'm glad. I think I could be very jealous...."

"Oh yeah? And what if I decided to be jealous of Lana?" she protested.

He threw her a lop-sided smile. "You can if you want. But it'd be a waste of time. She's blissfully happy with Pete, and I'm... I can't think of anything which would make me happier than to be with you."

Lois thumped his upper arm lightly. "You have a real way with words, Kent." Smiling softly, she added, "Earth guys just don't stand a chance with you around."

"But you're sure you don't mind me being Superman? I mean, you weren't thrilled about him even before you knew he was just me," Clark enquired anxiously, remembering Lois's initial reaction to discovering the existence of the Man of Steel.

But she shook her head, dismissing the very thought of his words. "Look, I didn't know the first thing about him - well, you as him - then. You know me, Clark, or I think you do pretty well by now. I'm cynical - I always think the worst of everyone. And I just couldn't accept that this guy flying around in tights didn't have a hidden agenda. I wanted to be the one to expose him."

"And you came pretty close," Clark murmured. "Would you have been as hostile if I hadn't kissed you that first time I rescued you?"

Lois hesitated; she had been hostile to Superman before that incident, but she had to admit that his behaviour at Perry's house had strengthened her prejudices. "I guess that made it worse," she admitted. "But it really didn't take long for me to learn that I was wrong. I got it all wrong at that interview, I know that - "

"Some of the questions you asked got pretty close to the truth, Lois," Clark pointed out. "That's probably one reason I was annoyed - I knew you were right about a couple of things."

"I was wrong about so much more, though," she admitted. "And you showed me that when you talked to me after the Chicago explosion."

"I shouldn't have burdened you with all that," Clark murmured guiltily.

"I'm glad you did," she said emphatically in return. "You need someone to talk to after that kind of thing. I know why you did it - to show me I was wrong about you. And it did - but it taught me a lot of good things about you too."

"You really helped me," Clark said huskily, grasping her hands more tightly. "I slept that night - normally after an experience like that, I wouldn't have done. I really wanted to tell you how much you'd helped me, but it was difficult when I had to carry on pretending to be someone you barely knew."

"The last time you came... after St John pushed me off the Planet roof... it was really weird, Clark, I couldn't understand it. I was beginning to feel... **attracted** to Superman, and I didn't know why." Lois raised her gaze to his again, her eyes revealing the confusion she had begun to feel. "I think that if I hadn't found out who you were yesterday, things could have become very difficult - I could easily have found myself thinking I was in love with two different men. Only, of course, Superman wasn't interested in me...."

"No?" Clark enquired, his brown eyes dancing. "I have to tell you, Lois, Superman is **very** interested in you and can't wait to get to know you better...." He trailed off, then added more soberly, "I really was going to tell you. I knew I loved you, and I couldn't carry on deceiving you, not if we were going to have a proper relationship."

"And then Luthor tried to kill us...." Lois murmured.

Clark draped his arm around her shoulders again, drawing her closer to him, then leaned towards her and claimed her lips in a tender kiss which quickly became increasingly passionate as she responded to him with all the fervour of their first proper kiss, that night outside her apartment.

"Mmmmm... oh, Clark, don't stop," Lois protested as he drew away a few minutes later.

"I was just thinking - it's getting late, and you're getting cold. Maybe we should go back."

Lois thought about his suggestion, then realised the advantages of being alone in her apartment. She could kiss him again; he could kiss her in return. They could explore each others' bodies, perhaps even more... although her previous intimate experiences with men had been nothing short of disasters, somehow she was sure that with Clark it would be wonderful. "Okay."

"You know, Lois, either you're going to have to get a new apartment or we'll have to get married even faster than I'd imagined. This place doesn't give me nearly enough privacy for Super entrances and

exits." Thus commenting, Clark placed Lois gently on her feet in her living room.

"A new apartment? You only helped me move in here less than two weeks ago!" she protested, then faltered. "Married... you said married...?"

"Yeah - well, I was kind of hoping that's what we'd do. You know, fall in love, get married, live happily ever after?" Clark's face bore an anxious expression. He'd forgotten about Lois's experiences of her parents' marriage, and he realised that perhaps she wouldn't actually want to get married.

Her initial response wasn't encouraging; she moved away from him, walking slowly across the room. He thought of going to her, then hesitated, unsure. But she turned back to him moments later. "Marriage is just... something I never thought I'd do, Clark. I mean, there's my career, and my parents...."

He strode to her side, taking her by the shoulders. "Lois, we are not your parents. We're us, and we love each other. And I think you're a brilliant journalist, and the last thing I want is to stop you doing that. I want us to be partners, at home and at work."

"I guess...." she said in a small voice. "Clark, I'm scared...."

"Hey, I'm scared too! This is a big step, and we've only known each other two weeks," he replied. "But despite that, in a weird way it feels as if I've known you all my life - the first time I saw you I knew we were meant to be together."

Lois stared at him. "I know, I said something like that to you yesterday. It really doesn't feel as if it's only been that long.... I just know you're the man I'm meant to be with. I don't understand it, but... that's just the way it seems."

They were standing close together, Clark's arms still around Lois, as they gazed deeply into each other's eyes. They drew closer, leaning in for another kiss, when a voice from behind them made them both jump in shock.

"Naturally you feel as if you were meant to be together, Mr Kent, Miss Lane. That is because you were. This is how it was intended to be, and will always be."

The speaker was a dapper little man in a very old-fashioned suit and bowler hat, who examined them through a lorgnette as he spoke. Clark's eyes widened: this was the same man who had given him the Superman suit!

"You!" he exclaimed in shock, only afterwards realising that Lois had spoken at precisely the same time. He stared at her.

"You're the man who found me in the Congo!" she added shakily.

"Quite right, Miss Lane. I had to rescue you from there: you had been there quite long enough, and I wanted to ensure that you and Mr Kent met. Had you stayed there much longer you might not have wanted to

return to Metropolis; you could have become permanently attached to your village home. So I had to act quickly."

"Who are you?" Clark demanded. "You wouldn't tell me last time."

"No," the stranger agreed. "The time was not then right for you to know."

"What do you mean, the time wasn't right?" Lois demanded. "Just who are you - and why did you give Clark that suit?"

The stranger held up his hand, as if for permission to speak. "Miss Lane, what I am about to tell you may seem very hard to believe, and it is for this reason that I was unable to introduce myself to either of you before. My name is HG Wells, and I am a time traveller."

"HG Wells... the writer?" Clark gasped. "But he's been dead...."

"For several decades?" their visitor enquired wryly. "Yes, I am aware of that. But, you see, I am actually from the latter part of the last century. I invented a time machine - "

"Yes, I read the book," Lois interrupted. "But that was *fiction*!"

"No, Miss Lane, it works," Wells told her. "I could tell you about things which, when they happen, would convince you, but I do make it a point not to tell people about their futures. It would be so easy to upset the pattern of time by careless talk, you know."

Clark, like Lois, was still sceptical, although he was at a loss for any other explanation of the man's presence, either now or on previous occasions. "Mr Wells - if you are Mr Wells - why did you give me that suit?"

"Because, Mr Kent," Wells replied, "like your counterparts in other universes, you were meant to be Superman. It was very important that you fulfilled that destiny. It was also very important that you and Miss Lane met, because your meeting and falling in love is also a very important part of your destiny. Without Superman, and Miss Lane, there would be no Utopia."

"Utopia?" Lois exclaimed. This was getting ridiculous....

"Yes, indeed. The future for this planet of ours. You and Superman - Mr Kent here - are essential to that future."

"What did you mean by 'other universes'?" Clark demanded incredulously. "And my 'counterparts'?"

"You thought that this was the only dimension?" Wells enquired with a raised eyebrow. "Mr Kent, you are from another planet - something many people in this world would not believe could happen. Are you going to tell me that you aren't willing to accept the possibility of alternate dimensions?"

Lois caught Clark's eye, trying to suggest to him that perhaps they needed to call the police, or the nearest lunatic asylum. But before

she could speak, their visitor took a couple of steps towards them.

"I can see that this is very difficult for you both to absorb. I can only assure you that I am neither lying or crazy. I am who I say I am, and everything else I've said to you is true. Perhaps, Miss Lane, it would help if I told you that I know you had worked out that Superman had another identity before you discovered exactly who he was?"

"How do you know that?" Lois demanded indignantly.

"Miss Lane, you and Mr Kent are in all the history books in the future. Every detail of your lives is recorded for posterity. Naturally I know about you."

"Our lives... you mean everyone knows I'm Superman?" Clark interjected in horror.

"Yes, Mr Kent, but I can assure you that by the time your identity becomes public knowledge it is perfectly safe for the information to be public. You and your descendants are heroes, looked up to by each successive generation."

"Descendants?" Lois choked out. "His... descendants?"

"And yours, Miss Lane," Wells replied, clearly amused.

Clark laughed, wrapping his arms around Lois. "See, you'll have to marry me, Lois. I refuse to have our children born out of wedlock."

"Hey, I never said I wanted children!" Lois exclaimed. "Clark... you believe him?"

Clark paused, then replied with a little hesitancy. "Yeah. I think so. I mean, he *could* be crazy, but how does that explain the Suit?" He turned to Wells. "Is that what... my counterparts in the alternate universes wear?"

"Yes, indeed," Wells confirmed. "The original suit was made by Martha Kent, once Clark Kent realised that he needed a disguise in order to carry out his rescues. Since the Martha Kent of this world died twenty years ago, you needed to acquire the suit by another means. In another universe, Lois made the suit, but in this case you needed to become Superman before she returned from the Congo."

"Why?" Clark demanded. "Why, at that precise moment?"

"I think you know the answer to that question, Mr Kent," Wells suggested to him quietly.

Clark paused, then ran his hand through his hair with a rueful expression on his face. "Before I married the wrong woman, you mean?"

"Precisely. You had to be prevented from making that mistake, so ensuring that you became Superman achieved the desired effect."

Lois glanced from Clark to Wells, noticing that Clark now seemed to accept the older man's words at face value. "So, Mr Wells, assuming this is all true," she interjected, "why have you told us all this now?"

"Because you deserved an explanation," he responded calmly. "I had already interfered in both of your lives, and you had realised, from sharing your experiences, that you had both met me in strange circumstances. Therefore I felt that I had better introduce myself."

Lois again glanced at Clark; she could see that this explanation seemed to convince him further. She couldn't help but be persuaded herself: how could this man have known about their conversation only a short while earlier, in Smallville, unless he was telling the truth about being a time-traveller and knowing all about their lives?

"Yes, it is much simpler to believe me, Miss Lane, isn't it?" HG Wells observed with an enigmatic smile. "And now, I will leave you two young love-birds together. I won't give you my best wishes for a long and happy life together, since I already know your futures."

With that, he walked quickly towards the door and exited. Lois stared at Clark, stunned, for a moment, then ran to the door and opened it again; the corridor was empty. There was no sign of the strange little man.

"He's gone, Clark!"

Clark wrapped his arm around Lois's shoulder. "Well, he told us he's a time-traveller - and he's right, I do believe him. He's probably in another century by now."

"Did you really believe all that stuff about our... descendants, Utopia and so on?" Lois asked shakily.

Clark smiled ruefully. "As he said, I'm from another planet. What's more unlikely? Anyway, I guess if any children I have inherit my powers, they could grow up to be pretty special people."

"You're a pretty special person yourself, Clark," Lois murmured, the sincerity in her eyes assuring Clark just how strongly she felt about that. "But - what do you think he meant about not wishing us long and happy lives? You don't think...?"

Clark shrugged. "I think he just meant he knows what happens in our lives, so he doesn't need to hope for anything." He moved closer to Lois, enfolding her in his arms. "But forget him, you still haven't given me an answer."

"To what?"

"In case you hadn't noticed, Ms Lane, I had proposed marriage to you," he reminded her, his eyes twinkling, though inside his heart was pounding. What if she said no?

"Who's asking? Clark or Superman?" she teased him.

"Just me, Lois. Just the man you see standing in front of you, the mild-mannered reporter who just happens to be able to fly."

She smiled at him, a warm, open gesture from a woman who not long ago had not known how to trust. "I only marry men who fly," she assured him, laughing.

- The End -

[at last ;)]

End
file.